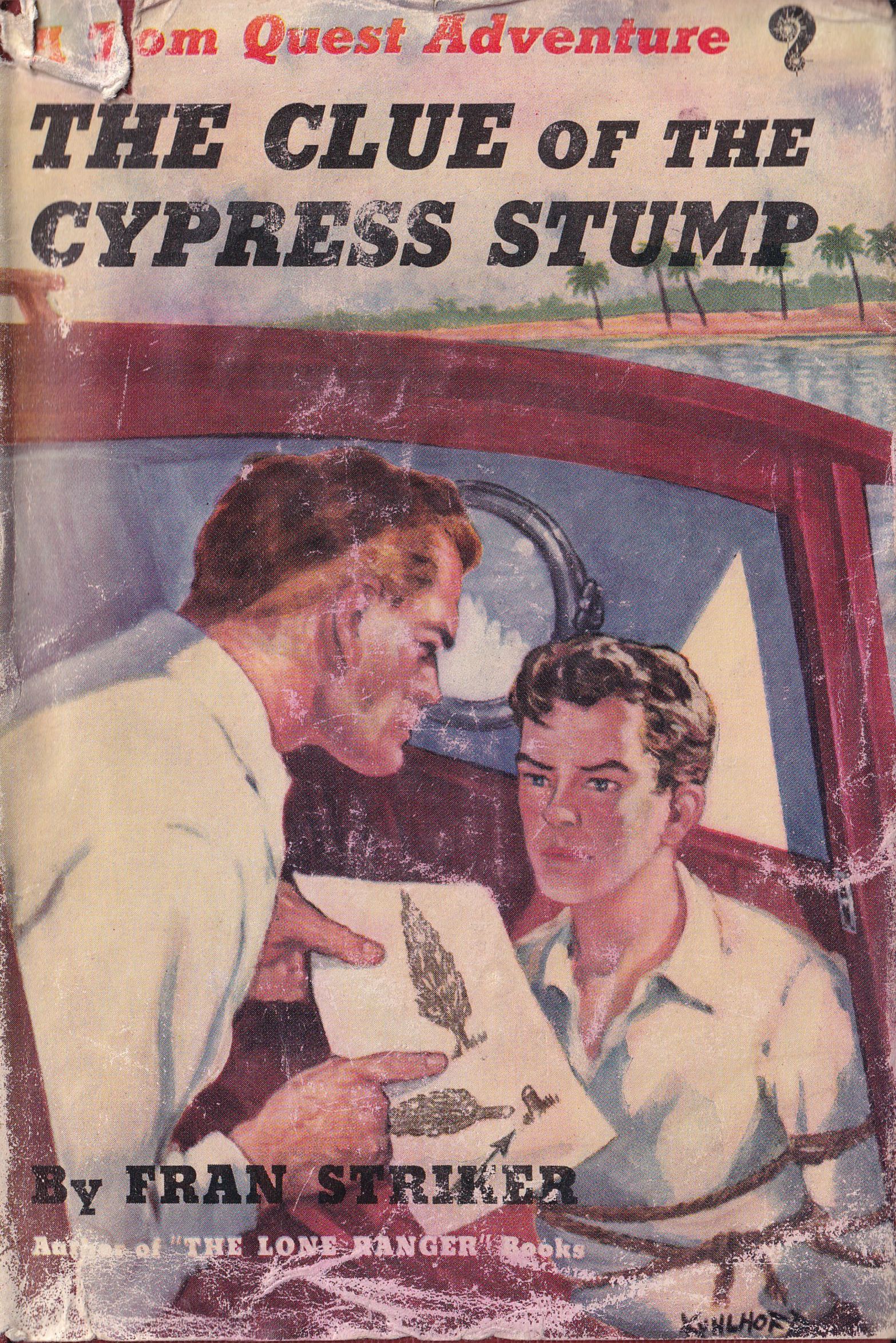
A Tom Quest Adventure

THE CLUE OF THE CYPRESS STUMP



By FRAN STRIKER

Author of "THE LONE RANGER" Books

THE CLUE OF THE CYPRESS STUMP

FRAN STRIKER

A TOM QUEST

ADVENTURE

GROSSET & DUNLAP

A Tom Quest Adventure

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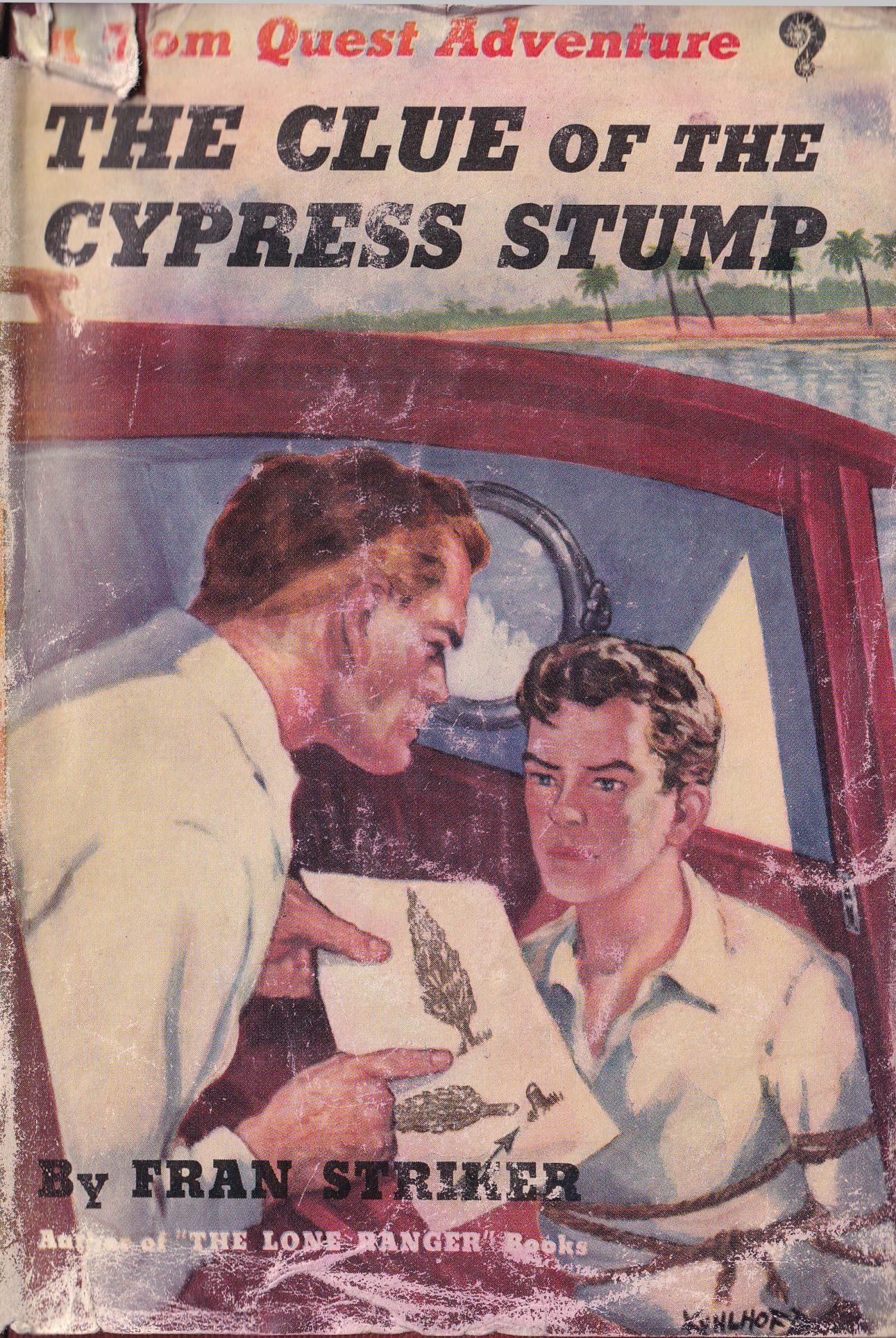

By FRAN STRIKER

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A Tom Quest Adventure Story

THE CLUE OF THE CYPRESS STUMP

By FRAN STRIKER

VACATIONING in Florida, Tom Quest and Gulliver, the irrepressible Texan, are drawn into a mystery almost as impenetrable as the very cypress swamps that hide its solution.

Whiz Walton, crack reporter and Tom's friend, needs help in landing what promises to be the biggest news scoop of the year. Somewhere in the Florida Everglades is hidden a cache of stolen platinum. Following a lead on the criminals' hide-out, Tom, Whiz and Gulliver set out to keep a midnight rendezvous with a "ghost" ship.

But what awaits them only deepens the mystery. Who unleashed deadly fumes on the boat? Who trapped the Indian in the air lock? Who drew the crude sketch of a cypress stump?

To find the answers to these questions the three friends undertake a perilous trip into the tangled swamps. The thrilling climax comes in a knock-down, drag-out fight in which treachery is avenged — and the cypress stump finally yields its secret.

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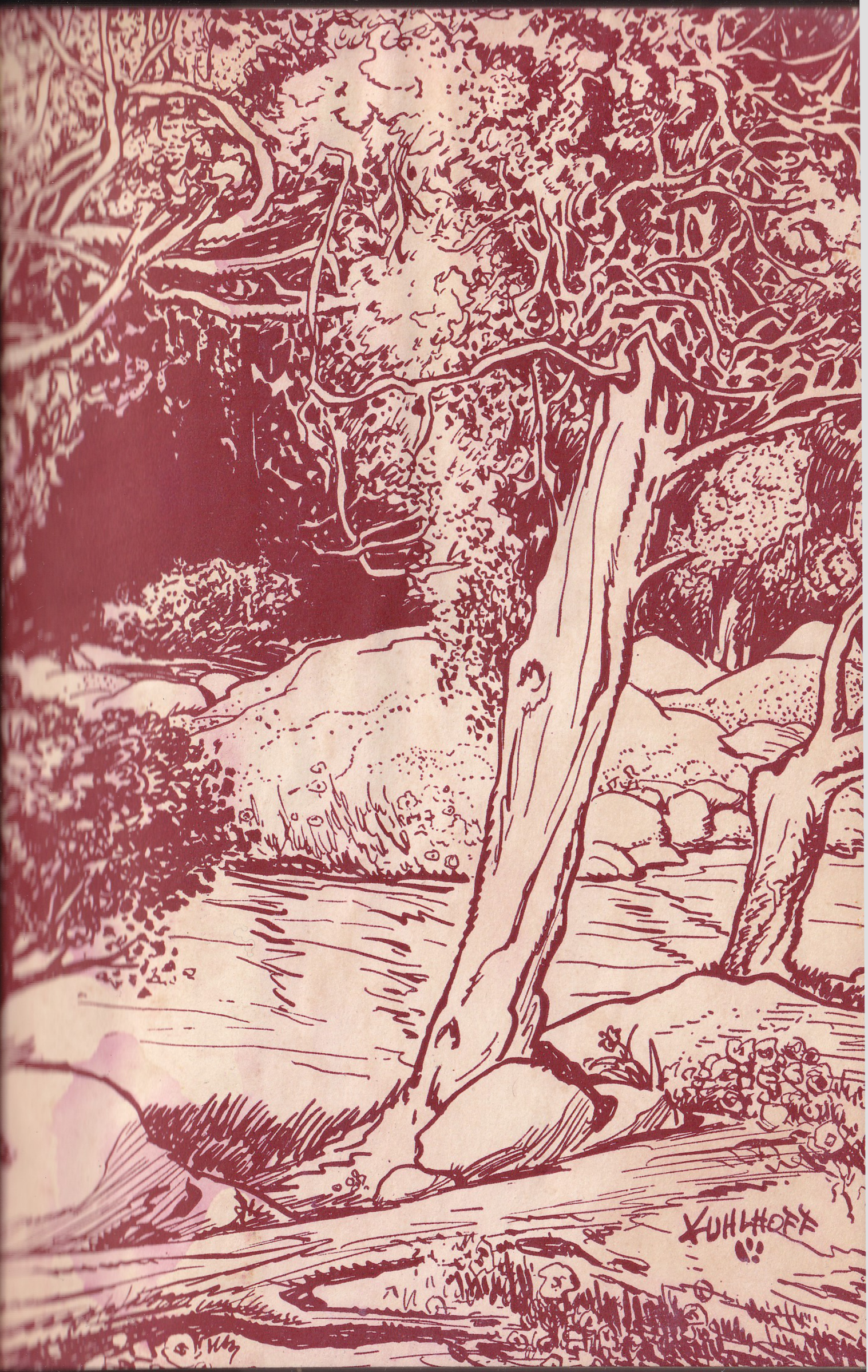
KUHLHOFF

KUHLHOFF

THE CLUE OF THE CYPRESS STUMP

"So that's the secret of the cypress stump!" Whiz exclaimed

The Clue of the Cypress Stump

A Tom Quest Adventure

THE CLUE OF THE CYPRESS STUMP

BY

FRAN STRIKER

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Contents

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	Invitation to Adventure	1
II	Gulliver Strips for Action	9
III	Fire!	19
IV	The Ghost Ship	27
V	The Mysterious Box	35
VI	The Indian's Message	45
VII	The End of the "New Granada"	57
VIII	The Detective's Story	66
IX	Gulliver Draws a Picture	77
X	The Blond Giant	81
XI	Captain Popple Talks	87
XII	Kidnaped	94
XIII	Bound for the Cypress Stump	101
XIV	Tom Talks Back	110
XV	Gulliver Sets the Pace	117
XVI	A Ray of Hope	123
XVII	Break for Freedom	133
XVIII	The Seminole Village	142
XIX	Osceola Lends a Hand	151

CONTENTS

XX	The Sun Goes Down	159
XXI	The Double Cross	166
XXII	A Glow in the Dark	174
XXIII	Grim News	181
XXIV	The Stump's Secret	185
XXV	In the Nick of Time	192
XXVI	Conclusion	203

THE CLUE OF THE CYPRESS STUMP

CHAPTER 1

Invitation to Adventure

"Gimme the Quest mail."

The clerk at Homestead dropped the mail he had been sorting and looked with startled eyes at the source of the booming voice that sounded like a foghorn with laryngitis.

He shuddered.

The man before the wicket must have weighed at least three hundred pounds without an ounce of fat. His nose was flattened; his eyes were small and close together and his battered, weather-beaten face resembled something chiseled out of granite. His frown was grim and menacing.

"The—the Quest mail?" echoed the clerk thinly.

The big man squinted one eye suspiciously.

"Are yo'," he rumbled, "hard o' hearin', or just plain obstinate? I said the Quest mail. Hamilton Quest an' his son Tom have rented a house over at the beach a few miles south of Miami. Their mail comes here. I want it."

"I—I know about Mr. Quest," faltered the clerk. "He and Tom have been living in the Gilpin house for several weeks. But—" he hesitated, "I—I'm sorry, sir, I d-don't know you."

"I'm Gulliver. Tom an' his pa are my best friends. I just got to their place yesterday to spend some time with 'em. Now what about that mail?"

The clerk's hand trembled as he reached into a pigeonhole and drew out half a dozen envelopes. He leafed through them and paused at one. The uncertainty left his face and relief was in his voice.

"I guess it's all right," he said. "One of these letters is addressed to you in care of Hamilton Quest."

"Lemme see it." Gulliver held the envelope in a hairy paw and muttered, "I wonder who'd be writin' to me." Then he saw the return address.

"Great day!" he exploded.

The clerk jumped.

"It's from Whiz Walton!" Tearing open the envelope he went on, "Maybe you've heard o' Whiz Wal-

ton. He's one o' the best newspapermen that ever rapped a typewriter."

The clerk recognized the name of a prominent columnist associated with a New York newspaper. He made no comment. Gulliver, reading his letter, didn't seem to expect one.

The big man looked up, grinning. He crumpled the letter and shoved it into the pocket of his dungarees while his free hand scooped up the rest of the mail.

"Got to git gittin'," he said. "Whiz Walton's comin' here! And that means anythin' can happen!"

He was through the door. Two steps carried him across the sidewalk to a battered jeep parked at right angles to the curb. He crowded into the wholly inadequate space behind the wheel and flattened his foot on the starter. The jeep's unmuffled motor roared. The small car shot forward over the curb. In a tight turn it brushed a lamppost, then bounced back to the street. Gulliver wrenched the wheel and straightened out in a beeline due east toward the cottage that Tom Quest and his father had rented.

Tom Quest lay flat on his stomach watching cottony combers wash the sandy beach. The sun of late August was warm on his back. His crisp black hair was wet and curly after a long swim. He had put all his energy into the swim in a futile effort to submerge a

restless feeling that had been growing stronger every day.

Gulliver's recent arrival as a house guest had brought a temporary reprieve, but today the restiveness had returned tenfold.

Tom brushed at the dry sand until he reached the damp underlayer. He patted it idly, packing it down, then traced a pattern with one finger. It was a spiral pattern that resembled the gold figure on his ring.

The boy looked at the ring reminiscently. The spiral had been one of a pair of earrings designed by Tom Quest's father and worn by his mother. After her death, the earrings had been mounted on two signet rings. Tom wore one, Gulliver the other.

Readers of *Sign of the Spiral* will remember the strange meeting between Tom and Whiz Walton, a crack newspaperman, and the manner in which the spiral put these two and Gulliver on the trail of a notorious gang whose hide-out was beneath a ghost town.

The three had been substantially rewarded and had used the money to go in search of Tom's father, who for ten years had been lost in the unexplored jungles of Peru. Here again the spiral pattern on the ring had played a prominent part in Tom Quest's life. There had been trials and perils among the Jivaro head-hunters, but at the end of the trail Hamilton Quest had been

found in an Indian village. Tom would never forget the amazing way in which big Gulliver had won the respect of the world's most savage people with a display of white man's magic.

But these adventures, as related in *The Telltale Scar*, were in the past.

Tom Quest loved adventure with the healthy craving of a strong boy of seventeen. He wanted action. The idleness in Florida was becoming unbearable.

Tom's reveries were broken off abruptly by the clank and roar of Gulliver's jeep. Tom rolled over in the sand and sat up. He saw the little car dodging through a palmetto grove and making its own tracks on a grassy lawn with utter disregard for the turn in the driveway leading to the house.

Gulliver waved one hand frantically, and his bull-like bellow rose above the motor.

"Hey, Tom!" he cried. "I got somethin' for yo'!"

The lawn ran out. The jeep hit sand and came on, bouncing wildly but with no slackening of speed.

Tom stood up and grinned as Gulliver slammed on the brakes and cut the ignition.

"Doggoned car," he said proudly as he dismounted. "She's a buckin' fool. A man that can stay aboard my jeep could ride the wildest bronc in Texas."

"Where have you been?" asked Tom.

"It was mailtime, so I went to town. I looked for yo',

but yo' were swimmin' hard, an' couldn't hear me yell. So I went on, figurin' to git back before yo' was through. I just about made it," he added, pulling a letter from his pocket.

"Look what I got!" Gulliver went on. "It's a letter from Whiz Walton. He's a-comin' here!"

"Here!" exclaimed Tom. His drooping spirits gave an upward surge. It would be good to see the columnist. Whiz Walton's breezy manner would be like a tonic.

"When is he coming?"

"Read it for yo'self."

Tom read the typewritten letter. It was brief and to the point.

"He just says he's coming here and will arrive soon after we receive this letter. He hopes you're here—" Tom looked up.

Gulliver was pawing through the rest of the mail.

"He says he's writing to Dad and me," Tom continued.

"I got yo' letter right here."

Gulliver stuffed the rest of the mail into his pocket. "I'll open it for yo'."

Tom read the letter aloud. It was longer than Gulliver's, but it left much to be explained. "*Dear Tom,*" it began:

"*I am on the way to get the biggest news beat of the year and have chartered a cruiser to meet my story on*

the high Atlantic. Break out your sea gear and join me. Gulliver, too, if he's on hand. Bowline Popple is a character, but you'll like him.

"Keep your eyes on the coast and when you see the Smackover X putting in, you can spread the news that Whiz Walton has arrived!

Yours,
Whiz"

Gulliver looked perplexed.

"That doggoned Whiz," he complained. "He's as unexpected as the fifth ace in a poker deck. What's he mean by coyotin' around on a seagoin' buckboard?"

Tom was enthusiastic. "He says it's the biggest story of the year, Gulliver!" he exclaimed. "It must be terrific."

"I," growled Gulliver, "don't like boats."

"Why not?"

"Last time I went aboard a boat, we hit a frothy spell. The water was meaner'n a centipede with chilblains, an' I had to hang on to the rail like a sick kitten to a warm brick to keep from bein' bounced plumb out o' the boat."

Tom laughed. "After the broncs you've ridden in Texas, and the way you take the jeep over rough ground, I shouldn't think you'd mind a boat!"

"It's different," Gulliver replied bluntly. "If a man gits throwed off'n a boat, it's likely to be a long ways

down to solid ground with a lot o' wet in between."

"We'll see that you aren't thrown off the boat. We'll strap you to the rail if we have to, or tie you to the mast. And if you want us to, we'll put a life preserver on you so that if you do go overboard, you won't sink all the way to solid ground."

"I can git along first-rate without gittin' seagoin'. The whole state o' Texas has got by without no boats. I reckon I can do it."

"Not in Florida you can't." Tom grinned. "You're going along with Whiz and me if we have to shanghai you."

CHAPTER 2

Gulliver Strips for Action

HAMILTON QUEST had been without hope of ever again seeing civilization when his son had found him in the jungles of Peru. He had been living from day to day, merely marking time until death released him from ten years of captivity. He had been pale and gaunt, a wasted shadow of a man, but the past few weeks in Florida had brought great changes. Fresh air and sunshine had melted away the years, and nourishing food had added poundage. There was a sparkle in his eyes, and his interest in life had returned. It was good to be back in the state he loved, back with his son. It was good to be alive and able to work.

He had equipped a small room off the library for his work. There were a large table, and racks filled with charts and maps. He had a drawing board and a set of instruments for drafting. Hamilton Quest spent many hours in that room working on a project in anthropology which he had started many long years ago. Some of the charts on the walls of the room were relics of the past when, as a young man, he had penetrated the cypress swamps of the Everglades on surveying expeditions. It was this experience in country that closely resembled tropical jungle that had made the scientist a valuable member of the doomed expedition that had gone to Ecuador and Peru.

One of the old charts was spread out for scrutiny. Quest studied it for some time, then made an entry in a notebook. He looked up and saw Tom standing at the doorway.

The boy wore slacks and a "T" shirt. His hair had been combed wet after a fresh-water shower.

Quest leaned back in his chair and smiled fondly. "How was the swimming, son?"

Tom nodded. "All right," he said.

"Was there any mail for you today?"

"Gulliver went to town for it. Didn't he give it to you?"

Hamilton Quest nodded slowly. "I got mine. I wondered if there was a letter for you."

"Yes, there was, Dad." Tom reached into his pocket. "I had a letter from Whiz Walton. Perhaps you'd like to read it."

"Not just now."

Tom saw a curious expression on his father's face—a knowing smile, and an almost imperceptible twinkle in the eyes.

"Whiz Walton is coming here. In fact, he might be here today."

"Tell me about it later, son."

The boy wondered why his father was so unmoved by the announcement.

"I wish to finish some work I'm doing," Quest continued. "I'll join you on the porch in a few minutes."

"Is that work so terribly important?"

The engineer nodded.

"You've been spending a lot of time on those old charts of the Everglades. Are you doing something special, Dad?"

The reply was evasive. "I'm just making a few additions to some of the charts—modernizing them." Quest turned slightly in his chair toward his son. "Most people don't like the Everglades, but they don't know them as I do."

Tom nodded his head slowly. "I know what you mean, Dad," he said. "You've shown me a little of them since we came here, and gosh, it's—" He hesitated.

"The swamps depress you, don't they? I know exactly how you feel. The first time I went inland, the country reminded me of a sponge whose pores were filled with stagnant water. I saw nothing but rotting things; slinking, poisonous reptiles and insects. Even the cypress trees, magnificent as they are, had a funereal aspect."

He leaned back in his chair. His eyes were half closed as he went on reminiscently in a lower voice. "Yes, that's it. A funereal aspect. As if they stood like sentinels over a vast burying ground. And then I became better acquainted with the Everglades, and learned about people who, for over a hundred years, have lived there beyond the reach of civilization. It's those people I'm getting in touch with again after all these years. I—" He broke off, and sat up.

"Forgive me, Tom." Mr. Quest laughed. "Don't get me started on the cypress swamps. Go to the porch and wait for me. I think you'll find Gulliver there. Go on now. Scoot!"

Tom laughed at his father's use of a word that went back almost to his babyhood. He obeyed, but on the way to the porch he wondered about the curious expression, the knowing look that mention of Whiz Walton's letter had brought to his father's face.

He found Gulliver squatting tailor-fashion on the

wide veranda, unloading the contents of a heavy, battered wooden chest. The chest, about two feet square, was one of Gulliver's most precious possessions, and had accompanied him wherever he went for as long as Tom could remember.

The big man was surrounded by an assortment of bottles in many sizes and shapes, as well as jars and boxes. Some of the containers were identified by numbers, some by names, and many were unlabeled.

Long before it had become Gulliver's property, the chest had belonged to the captain of a clipper ship. All captains of that day had carried similar chests stocked with medicines and first-aid supplies to meet practically any emergency. A book of instructions prescribed the number to be used for each specific ailment. The drugs probably had long since lost their potency, and Gulliver had never seen the book of instructions. Nevertheless, he insisted on trying to cure all ailments by trial-and-error method.

In addition to the chest's original contents, there were herbs and spices that Gulliver favored in his cooking and an assortment of other items including saddle soap, machine oil, cartridges, spare parts for the jeep, friction tape, sewing needles, thread, buttons, keys that had no earthly use, nails, screws, nuts and bolts. Gulliver was dead set against throwing anything away.

He looked up as Tom came to the porch and held out a small bottle half filled with white powder.

"Hi, Tom," he said. "Do yo' remember why I saved this stuff?"

Tom shook his head. "No, and I don't know what it is. Why don't you throw it out?"

"Aw-w, it don't take up much room. I might as well hang on to 'er. Someday it might come in handy."

Tom sat on the steps. "This is the first time I've seen you clean out that medicine chest," he observed.

"I'm not cleanin' 'er out."

"What are you doing?"

"Quarters on that there *Smackover X* are likely to be downright undersized. There likely won't be room for my chest, so I'm pickin' out the things I'll need."

From the depths of the chest Gulliver extracted a bottle labeled "No. 32" and placed it at one side, with a few selected items.

"This here," he said, "holds my hot peppers. Yo' know, Tom," he continued blandly, "there's two things a man has got to guard against aboard a ship."

"What are they?"

"Gettin' seasick an' gettin' pulin' food. If there's anythin' I can't tolerate it's food that's got no authority."

"You," laughed Tom, "like your food spiced until it's so hot no one else can eat it!"

"I like 'er lively."

"But we may not—"

Gulliver interrupted him with the continuation of his medicine-chest inventory.

"Here is somethin' else I'll want to take along. This here Tabasco sauce was made by a half-breed gal in Mexico City. It's the liveliest I ever et."

"Gulliver," Tom said slowly, "I've been thinking. Maybe I ought not—"

"Tom," broke in Gulliver, turning squarely to face the boy, "what yo' been thinkin' an' what is comin' about are two different things. I had a talk with yo' dad while yo' was dressin' after yo' swim. I told him about Whiz Walton's letter."

"Oh, gosh, Gulliver, I wish you hadn't."

"The reason yo' was beginnin' to be doubtful o' goin' with Whiz was on account o' yo' didn't think it would be right to leave yo' dad. Ain't that it?"

Tom nodded. "That's it," he admitted. "It doesn't seem right to leave him here alone after just a few weeks."

"Yo' aimed to make him think yo' didn't want to go while all the time yo' insides was ranklin' with an itch to be up an' doin'."

Tom's face registered surprise.

"The fact is," Gulliver went on smoothly, "yo' dad wants yo' to go."

"Wants me to?" asked Tom in amazement.

"That's right." It was Hamilton Quest speaking from the doorway.

"But, Dad—"

Tom's father was smiling as he came to the veranda.

"I," he said, "asked Whiz Walton to invite you."

"You've been in touch with Whiz?"

"There has been some rather lengthy correspondence by letter and telegram, and several conversations by long-distance telephone. I planned to tell you as soon as Walton's plans were definite. From the letters you and Gulliver have received, it looks as though everything is set. You have been fine about staying here with me, but I know exactly how you have felt."

Tom was almost at a loss for words. "Wha—what do you mean, Dad?"

"You have wanted to be on the move. You have felt an urge to do things. You have wanted more excitement—"

"Gosh, Dad, I—I guess you're right."

"If you were interested in deep-sea fishing, son—"

"But I'm not," said Tom emphatically.

"I know."

"Fishing and hunting are all right, Dad, if you need the food you kill, but somehow it doesn't seem right to shoot animals or take fish just for the sake of killing. I don't see any sport in it."

"I understand."

"I—I tried not to show it, but I've felt kind of jumpy."

"You haven't shown it."

"Then how did you know?"

Tom engineer smiled. "By the simple process of placing myself in your position. When I was a boy of seventeen, I found it virtually impossible to be content with sleeping, eating and swimming for more than one day at a time, and you've had several weeks of it."

Tom grinned. "I should have known better than to try to fool you, Dad."

"It's simple, applied psychology—a case of projecting myself into the situation of another individual and thinking as that individual logically would think."

Quest assumed a professorial manner. "To determine," he said, "where a dog would bury a bone, place yourself in the position of the dog—"

"—an' go where the dog would go," broke in Gulliver, quoting that which was quite familiar, "an' there yo'll find the bone."

Tom felt his spirits soar. His face was alight with enthusiasm.

"Gosh!" he said, "then it's really all right for Gulliver and me to go with Whiz? You won't mind?"

"Mind? Son, I want you to go. In the first place, Whiz Walton may need you and Gulliver. And in the second place," Quest paused, "you may learn a lot before you're

through with this adventure. You may even learn to like the Everglades."

"*Waaahh-hooooo!*"

Gulliver's sudden bellow fairly rocked the house.

"Look over there!" he exclaimed, pointing to the shore five hundred yards away.

A trim-looking cabin cruiser was putting in.

"There she is!"

Tom grabbed binoculars from a near-by table. "That's the one," he said, peering through the instrument. "I can read the name. It's the *Smackover X!*"

"Whiz Walton's here!" exclaimed Gulliver.

"This," murmured Hamilton Quest in an almost inaudible voice, "is the beginning."

CHAPTER 3

Fire!

Tom Quest and Gulliver greeted Whiz Walton like a long-lost brother. There were backslappings and handshakes and hearty expressions of friendship.

Hamilton Quest was more reserved but nonetheless sincere in welcoming the reporter.

"Is everything set at this end?" Whiz Walton asked as he shook hands with the engineer.

"I think it is, Whiz," Hamilton Quest replied. "I'd like to see you in my workroom right away."

Turning to his son and Gulliver, he added, "You two wait on the veranda. We'll join you in a few minutes."

Opening the screen door, he led the way through the library to the little workroom. The hot sun of mid-afternoon slanted through the open window.

"Whew!" exclaimed Whiz. "It's hot in here!"

"It's pretty bad in the afternoon," Quest agreed, "but I do most of my work during the morning or evening so it doesn't bother me. I've completed the chart. There it is."

He pointed to a large-scale map that had been fastened to the table with thumbtacks. For several days he had been working over the chart of a section of swampland, making insertions from his personal notes. The new additions showed landmarks, trails, hummocks and particularly dangerous areas, as well as Indian settlements, facts known only to the Seminoles and to Hamilton Quest.

Whiz Walton bent over the chart and squinted at the small lettering.

Quest handed him a high-powered reading glass. "This may help," he said.

"It's a nice piece of work," approved the newshound. "Jim Broderick will be mighty grateful to you. Does Tom know what you've been doing?"

"He knows I've been working on maps, but he doesn't know why. I've told him nothing. But it hasn't been easy, Walton. I know that he feels I'm concealing something from him, and I don't like it."

The newspaperman protested, "I feel the same way, Mr. Quest, but this wasn't my secret. It's Broderick's."

Hamilton Quest placed the reading glass, handle

down, in a jar filled with pointed drawing pencils that rested on the table. He handed the jar to Whiz. "Put this on the window sill, and I'll roll up the map for you." As Quest pulled out the thumbtacks and rolled the chart, he asked, "How much can we tell Tom and Gulliver?"

"So far as I can see," Whiz replied, "we can tell them everything now that they are going with Broderick and me, but I wouldn't want anyone else to know what you've been doing." Then he added cautiously, "Are there any servants in the house?"

"We live simply. An old Seminole comes in the morning to clean up, but he's been gone since noon."

"Then I guess it's safe enough to talk around here."

"Quite." The scientist slipped the rolled-up map into a cardboard tube and offered it to Whiz.

"Leave it there on the table," the reporter said. "I'll pick it up before we leave."

Hamilton Quest nodded and led the way to the porch.

Tom bounced to his feet. "Hey, Whiz," he asked, "how soon are we leaving?"

"I told Captain Popple," the columnist replied, "that we'd shove off at sundown. That should give us time enough to reach our rendezvous at midnight."

Tom grinned delightedly. "Midnight!" he said. "That sounds as if there's really something doing!"

"Do you," asked Whiz, looking at Hamilton Quest, "want to tell Tom and Gulliver, or shall I?"

"You."

The reporter nodded. "I'll start at the beginning," he said.

"During the war, a number of ships carrying platinum from Colombia to the United States were sunk in the Caribbean and farther north above the West Indies and the Bahamas. Some of those went down pretty close to shore. They were, of course, insured. The insurance company paid off the losses."

"What's that got to do with us?" demanded Gulliver.

"I'll get to you if you'll keep quiet," the columnist retorted. "After the insurance company took stock of the situation, they learned that a number of the vessels had gone down in water shallow enough to make salvage possible. Divers located several of the sunken boats and found the darnedest thing you ever heard of—"

"What's that?" asked Tom.

"The strongboxes on those ships had been cut open with underwater blowtorches. The platinum was gone."

"Gone!" echoed Tom.

Whiz nodded. "A gang of undersea pirates had been at work. That's when my friend Jim Broderick moved in."

"Who's Jim Broderick?" Tom asked.

"We went to school together. He's one of my best

friends. He used to be with the FBI. During the war he was affiliated with the OSS, and now he's working for the insurance underwriters. He's been at work on the case for some time, and he's learned a lot. He has reason to believe that the platinum pirates were enemy agents during the war, and in that capacity they knew where the ships went down. Broderick thinks they have a hide-out somewhere in the Everglades. He called on me because I knew Hamilton Quest."

"Golly!" murmured Tom, looking proudly at his father. "Had he heard of Dad?"

"In reading about the cypress swamps of Florida, he ran across a couple of books your father had written a long time ago. He realized that Hamilton Quest was an authority."

Gulliver broke in. "There ain't a man alive knows them there swamps as well as Quest," he said.

"Now, Gulliver—" the older man put in modestly.

"Well, it's true. Before yo' got married, yo' spent a lot o' time sloshin' an' sluicin' through them swamps an' makin' survey maps an' notes."

The big man turned to Whiz Walton. "An' that ain't all," he said. "He made friends with the Seminoles that live in there. Fact is, them Seminole critters made a blood brother outta Hamilton Quest."

"Is that true?" Whiz asked, looking at Quest.

"Yes, I'm a member of the Mikasuki tribe."

"What about the pirates?" asked Tom somewhat impatiently.

The reporter continued, "Jim Broderick asked me to engage your father to prepare a chart of certain parts of the big swamp."

Tom looked at his father. "You sure can keep a secret, Dad. I didn't know you'd been working for the insurance underwriters."

The father smiled and nodded. "Go on, Whiz. Finish up," he said.

"Well, there's not much more to tell. Jim Broderick wants the map. I don't know why he can't come here and get it, but he can't. He sent me a radio message asking me to deliver it to him tonight."

"At midnight!" put in Tom.

Whiz nodded. "I thought you and Gulliver might like to go along, so I asked your father about it when I called him long-distance to see if the map would be ready. I had a friend in Miami charter the *Smackover X*. I flew down from New York this morning."

During the last few minutes of the reporter's story, Gulliver had been sniffing the air.

"I smell smoke!" he said.

Tom took a deep breath and agreed, "So do I! It seems to be coming from the house!"

He jumped to his feet and opened the door.

"It is a fire!" he exclaimed, as he entered the library

and saw smoke coming from beneath the closed door of his father's workroom.

"Dad!" he called, rushing toward the door. "It's in your workroom!"

Tom threw back the door and was instantly engulfed in a cloud of smoke blown by the light breeze that came through the window. As the smoke cleared, he saw flames from burning paper leaping from the wastebasket near the window. The draperies and a number of rolled-up maps in a case near the wall were in flames.

Tom acted impulsively. He picked up the metal basket with its inferno and tossed it out the window. Then he felt himself jerked backward violently by a strong hand on his shoulder.

"Lemme in there!" roared Gulliver. "That's my kind o' work!"

Ignoring the flames, the big man pulled the draperies from their hangings and flung them through the window, following them with the burning charts. It all happened in the space of a few seconds. When Hamilton Quest appeared with a fire extinguisher, he found Gulliver slapping out the sparks that remained. The room was filled with smoke and the acrid odor of burned cloth and paper. The walls and ceiling were blackened, but the flames were gone.

Gulliver looked about as if seeking someone to blame for the fire.

"I'd like to know who started that," he said.

Whiz Walton picked up the tube holding Jim Broderick's map and tucked it beneath his arm.

"Good thing this wasn't burned," he observed. He put a cigarette between his lips, then snapped a wooden match into flame with his thumbnail.

Gulliver glowered at the reporter. "I wonder," he rumbled, "if someone tossed a match into that waste-paper basket."

"Don't look at me!" retorted the newshound.

Hamilton Quest said, "Neither of us smoked while we were in here."

"That fire didn't start its own self."

"Almost anyone could have tossed a match in the window," observed Tom. After a pause he added, "If anyone wanted to start a fire."

"I wonder who knew I was working on a map that might help expose the platinum pirates." Hamilton Quest spoke in a low voice, but Whiz Walton heard him and caught the full significance of his remark.

He snapped his fingers. "Holy mackerel!" he said. "Jim Broderick warned me that the platinum pirates had a well-oiled organization. It looks to me as if they've struck the first blow!"

CHAPTER 4

The Ghost Ship

THE *Smackover* X purred smoothly through a gently rolling sea. Captain Popple gripped the helm, his blue eyes peering through the cabin window, following the sweeping beam of a searchlight on the dark waters ahead.

"If that gob-thrashin' craft is anywhere afloat," he said grimly to Tom Quest at his side, "we'll find 'er."

The captain was a ninety-pound bundle of nervous energy. He was one of those ageless individuals who might have been anywhere past sixty. He was as agile as a monkey and as tough as a cypress plank.

The *Smackover* X was a trim, seaworthy cruiser, the tenth in a series of boats bearing the name of Bowline Popple's birthplace in Arkansas.

At dusk Whiz, Gulliver and Tom had said good-bye to Hamilton Quest on the porch of his cottage. The water was calm as they had piled into the outboard dinghy, reached the cruiser and scrambled aboard. A moment later they were under way, headed toward the open sea.

Tension had been increasing since midnight when the *New Granada*, with Jim Broderick aboard, had not been sighted at the rendezvous on the eightieth meridian due east of Soldier Key.

For the past half hour, Captain Popple had been steering in a widening circle, while Whiz Walton and Gulliver, on the roof of the deckhouse, operated the searchlight and scanned the sea through binoculars.

"Maybe," suggested Tom, "we were a little off on the meeting place. It's probably hard to find an exact spot on the ocean, especially at night."

"Hard nothin'," spat the skipper. "There's nothin' to it! For a man as knows the charts like I do, it's easier'n fallin' off a poop deck in a twister. If anyone's made a mistake, it's the skipper of the *New Granada!*" He removed his white cap and caressed the shiny top of his bald head. He set the cap at a jaunty angle, then scratched behind one of his stick-out ears. "It wouldn't be that skipper's first mistake!" he finished.

"You know him?" Tom asked in surprise.

"Nope."

"Then how do you know—"

"He made his first mistake in goin' to sea in a mud scow like the *New Granada*," interrupted the salty old man. "I looked 'er up in the registry. She's older'n I am."

Tom couldn't suppress a grin. "But, Captain Popple," he said, "*you're* still at sea."

"No comparison," the captain snorted. "There ain't a ship afloat that's got my toleration o' salt water, bilge an' barnacles."

"Hey, yo' down below—"

Gulliver's sudden shout from the deckhouse roof jarred Captain Popple like the impact of a heavy wave.

"That outsized sea lion!" he wailed in a piping voice. "That bellow of his is worse than firin' a broadside! It's like to split the seams!"

"He's spotted something," Tom said.

"Hey, Cap'n!" roared Gulliver. "Can yo' hear me?"

"Hear you?" shrilled the skipper. "Yes, I hear you! They can prob'ly hear you in Miami!"

"We got the searchlight on somethin'. Steer to the left."

"Landlubber," retorted Captain Popple. "I'll put 'er a notch to labbord, an' if you don't like that you can get out an' walk!"

"Yo' do as I say, yo' whittle-whangin' old squirrel, or I'll come down there an' unbraid yo' spine!"

By the time Tom had joined his friends, the cruiser's

course had been corrected. Dead ahead in the white glare of the searchlight, a dark shape rose and fell with the ocean's swell.

Moving at better than fifteen knots, the *Smackover X* bore down while Whiz Walton watched through binoculars. Presently, the black ship was identified as the *New Granada.*

"Something funny about her," the columnist observed.

"She's running without lights," Tom said. "Isn't that against the law?"

"She isn't running," corrected Whiz. "The boat has no headway. She's drifting." He handed the binoculars to Tom. "Here," he said. "I'm going to see Captain Popple."

Tom and Gulliver watched the *New Granada* while the cruiser slowed and came to a halt about fifty yards away. The squat-sterned vessel, riding low in the water, was without a light of any sort. Tom swept the deck with the searchlight, and found no sign of life.

"We're putting out a sea anchor," said Whiz as he came from the cabin below.

"Why don't that old tadpole go over closer?" Gulliver asked.

"He doesn't want to risk bumping," Whiz explained. "We'll go over in the small boat."

Gulliver eyed the *New Granada.* "I," he said, "don't

like the look o' things. There's somethin' muddy about that boat. An' I don't hanker to go coyotin' around."

"But we've got to see Jim Broderick."

"If yo' friend Broderick was there, he'd be lookin' for us. He ain't lookin', so he ain't there. We got no reason to mess around an abandoned ship."

"Abandoned!" broke in Tom. "Maybe that's it! Whiz, why do you suppose they'd abandon the *New Granada?*"

"Don't know," replied Whiz Walton shortly. "But I'm going to find out. If Gulliver's afraid to come with me—"

"Afraid!" barked Gulliver. "Who says I'm afraid! I'll go with yo', but I don't like it!"

The outboard dinghy, part of the *Smackover X's* equipment, was put over the side. Gulliver sat in the stern while Whiz Walton sat at Tom's side in the driver's seat.

Tom had handled many boats of the same class off the coast of Florida, so he experienced no difficulty during the short run to the side of the *New Granada*. Captain Popple had remained aboard the cruiser to keep the searchlight beamed on the mysterious vessel.

Tom swung alongside the *New Granada* and disengaged the clutch. "Ahoy!" he called. "Ahoy there, *New Granada!*"

There was no sound other than the idling motor and

the soft slapping of waves against the heavy sides of the black boat. It was indeed as old as Captain Popple had said. The paint was peeled and cracked in many places, and the bare wood was exposed. The general pattern of the ancient craft was one that had long since gone out of use.

"Let's circle her before we go aboard."

"Good idea, Whiz." Tom sent the motorboat ahead at slow speed. Rounding the stern he said, "It's so low in the water, I could stand up in this boat and reach the rail."

"Looks waterlogged," observed the reporter.

"There's somethin' muddy about it." The latter was a growl from Gulliver in the rear seat.

The searchlight didn't help when the trio reached the starboard of the *New Granada*. Whiz Walton turned on a flashlight; the playing beam revealed a rope ladder dangling over the side. Tom observed that the rail amidships was much higher than at the stern.

"What will we do, Whiz?" he asked. "Tie up to that ladder?"

The reporter nodded.

Tom cut the motor and permitted the small boat to coast the rest of the way. As Whiz made the painter fast, Gulliver got to his feet.

"I'm goin' up first," he said decisively. "Gimme that flashlight."

"Now hold on, big boy," Whiz said. "You and Tom just came along for the ride. This is supposed to be my party, and if there's any risk, I'm the cookie that's going to take it."

"Whiz," Gulliver said menacingly, "there's times when I get obstinate, an' this is one."

He gripped the ladder with one hand, took the flashlight with the other and climbed to the deck. Then he shouted, "Hey, there! Anyone to home?"

There was no reply as the newshound and Tom Quest went over the rail to their big friend's side.

Tom sensed an eerie atmosphere as he stood on the deck of the *New Granada* while Gulliver pointed the flashlight at the stern, then moved it slowly toward the wheelhouse in the bow. It was a feeling that couldn't be expressed in words, a vague impression that he and his friends were not alone on the ship despite the fact that there was nothing to indicate the presence of another. There was no sign of life or movement; no sound except the almost imperceptible "chunk" of small waves and the bump-bump of the dinghy against the ladder.

Whiz and Gulliver seemed to share Tom's feeling, for they stood stock-still listening for what seemed like a long time.

The silence was broken by Gulliver's mutter, "Muddy."

"We might as well look around," Tom said.

Whiz pointed at the wheelhouse, outlined in the beam of Captain Popple's searchlight.

"Bring the flashlight, Gulliver," he said. "We'll start there and go through this ship until we learn what's happened to Jim Broderick."

He started forward but felt himself jerked back by Gulliver.

"Hold on!" the big man said. "I'm geared for trouble. *I'm* goin' first!"

His heavy boots thudded on the cypress deck. "Maybe," he continued, "this here is one o' them ghost ships like yo' read about."

Gulliver was nearer the truth than he expected.

CHAPTER 5

The Mysterious Box

THE WHEELHOUSE was a small enclosure with glassed-in windows on all sides. Gulliver, with a flashlight, was ahead of Tom and Whiz when he reached the door and found it locked. He rattled it violently.

"Thunderation!" he exclaimed. "Why in tarnation would anyone lock the door to the steerin' gear?"

Looking through the window, Tom was amazed at what he saw. The searchlight flooding the room from one direction, and Gulliver's electric torch from another, revealed the newest of radio communications outfits, a radar and a loran installation enabling a navigator to pin-point his location at sea, and several other instruments, whose presence on a craft like the *New Granada* demanded explanation.

"Holy mackerel!" exclaimed Whiz Walton, looking over Tom's shoulder. "Look at that stuff!"

"That," said Gulliver, "is just what we aim to do!"

He drew back, placed his foot against the door and pushed. There was an explosive "Bang!" as the lock gave way and the door flew open. He started forward but halted abruptly. A man lay sprawled on the floor, either dead or unconscious.

Tom Quest found a switch near the door. He flicked it, turning on a ceiling light. The room was stuffy. The air seemed filled with a nauseating odor, cloyingly sweet.

The man on the floor was approximately middle-aged. He was well built. His face was lean and weather-beaten, and his hair was black. He wore navy-blue trousers and a white shirt, open at the neck.

Whiz Walton crouched and jerked back the man's shirt sleeve, tearing off the button at the cuff. He felt for a pulse.

"Is that yo' friend Broderick?" Gulliver asked.

The reporter said, "No."

Tom picked up a blue cap that lay on the floor near the base of the binnacle. The word "Captain" was embroidered in blue above the black leather visor.

"If this is his cap," he said, "he must be the owner of the *New Granada*. Is he alive?"

Whiz Walton nodded. "I can feel his pulse," he said.

"I don't know much about it, but it seems a little flutt-tery." He sniffed the air.

Gulliver noted the action. "It sure smells sick in here. I don't know what it is, but I smell somethin' that outdoes anythin' I ever smelled before."

"Whatever it is," the reporter replied, "it's giving me a headache. Let's get this guy out on deck where he can breathe fresh air."

"I'll do it," offered Gulliver. He picked up the unconscious man without effort, and carried him out of the wheelhouse.

Whiz Walton followed, but Tom remained to see if there was water in the jug that stood on a shelf across the room.

A number of framed licenses and other documents hung on the wall above the shelf. From these, the boy concluded that the unconscious man was named John Laraby. As he studied another document, the printing became blurred. He wondered if something were wrong with his eyes. He had to strain to focus on a charter that named Laraby as the *New Granada's* owner.

"Wonder what's wrong with me?" Tom murmured, as he felt a slight wave of nausea. He rubbed his eyes. "Feel dizzy," he muttered. "Fresh air might help."

The sickening-sweet air in the wheelhouse was becoming hard to breathe. He gripped the thermos jug

and joined his friends on deck. He felt better almost at once.

Gulliver splashed water on Laraby's face.

"If I only had my medicine chest," he complained, "I got things in there that'll snap a man conscious quicker'n yo' can say 'scat!' "

He and Whiz worked for some time, but the *New Granada's* owner remained motionless.

Whiz Walton finally said, "We might as well leave him here and see what we find on the rest of this ship. I'm worried about Jim Broderick."

Gulliver rose to his feet and gave his trousers a hitch. "One of us ought to stay here with this critter in case he gits conscious."

"If you want me to, I'll stay," volunteered Tom.

"Nope," said Gulliver emphatically. Pointing to the man on the floor he went on, "That critter didn't lose consciousness from nothin'. He's got a bump the size of a walnut square on top o' his head where it couldn't o' come from fallin' to the floor. Someone bopped him, an' I don't want the same to happen to yo'." He turned to Whiz. "Yo' stay here," he finished.

"Thanks," replied the newshound dryly. "If it's all the same to you, Gulliver," he pointed out quietly, "I think I'm the one who should be looking for Broderick."

The big man stared back at Whiz for a moment, and then his battered face broke into a grin.

"I keep fergittin'," he said, "that this ain't Texas. This is yo' party, Whiz, an' yo're the man to give the orders. I ain't figurin' to start no mutiny out here on this rat's nest."

The sight of Gulliver in an apologetic mood was almost more than the newspaperman could stand.

"This is no time to be arguing about matters of protocol," he replied. "You and Tom see what you can see while I try to bring this bozo to."

"Come on, Tom," said Gulliver, switching on the flashlight. "Let's see what we can corral down below."

A hatch opened to reveal a flight of stairs. Gulliver went down first and found a switch to turn on ceiling lights. Below deck, two doors were set in the wall on each side of a narrow companionway that seemed to extend the entire length of the ship.

Gulliver tried the nearest door and found it unlocked. The room held stores neatly stacked on shelves. It took but a moment to discover that there was no one in this room.

Sleeping quarters for a crew of four were found in the cabin on the opposite side of the companionway. There were two double-deck bunks divided by a narrow aisle. Two of these bunks, the lower ones, showed signs of recent use. Blankets on the uppers were folded to expose the naked mattress. Though small, the quarters were quite comfortable.

"Nothin' here," decided Gulliver. "Let's see what we can find in them other rooms."

Tom nodded. He caught a trace of the same sweet scent that had nearly stifled him in the wheelhouse but said nothing about it.

The next cabin, located amidships where the beam was widest, seemed to be the captain's quarters. It was comfortably furnished and carpeted.

Gulliver and Tom looked into the lockers. They found clothing, rolled-up charts, smoking supplies—a number of things, but not Jim Broderick.

Tom noticed as he followed Gulliver out of the cabin that the sweet odor had become stronger.

"Dag-nab it!" growled Gulliver. "How do yo' account for this boat bein' like she is? Why is she driftin' without headway? Why is she dark without no lights? An' what happened to Laraby?"

"Whatever it was, it must have happened during the afternoon, or twilight at the latest."

"How do yo' figure that?" Gulliver halted before the closed door of the fourth cabin.

"It's hot in the afternoon, but it gets pretty cold after the sun goes down. Captain Laraby was in his shirt sleeves. If he had been on the job after dark, he'd have been wearing a jacket."

Gulliver nodded approvingly. "That's good reasonin'."

"And what's more, the running lights would have been turned on."

"Maybe someone turned 'em off."

"That's possible," Tom agreed.

Gulliver gripped the doorknob. "We'll see what's in here," he said.

He opened the door, then fairly staggered back as a wave of sickening fumes swept out. The odor was the same as that in the wheelhouse but much intensified. It engulfed Tom like a shroud. He gasped and moved away from the door, took a deep breath of the clearer air in the companionway and held it while he reached into the room and switched on the light.

While he held his breath, he saw that the cabin was similar to Captain Laraby's, comfortably furnished as a stateroom. Instead of one bed there were two. One was empty. A man lay on the other.

Gulliver had inhaled several lungfuls of the noxious air. His face was distorted. He was gasping audibly.

"W-we—we—" he faltered, "we got to git some air in there!"

Tom was sure that the giddiness that had assailed him in the wheelhouse had been caused by the strange fumes. He felt like one swimming under water. He was running out of air, yet he dared not exhale. A lungful of the air in that cabin would be almost intolerable.

Acting on impulse, he pulled off his jacket, wrapped it around one fist and plunged into the cabin. It was the work of but an instant to jab his protected hand through the glass in one of the two portholes. He stuck his head through the opening, grabbed a lungful of clean air, then disposed of the glass in the second porthole.

He turned and saw Gulliver trying to lift the man on the bed. Under normal conditions, the big man could have lifted him with ease. But Gulliver was reeling. He struggled bravely, but his strength seemed to have been sapped.

"Here, Gulliver!" Tom called, crossing the room quickly. "Stick your head through a porthole! Get some fresh air before you pass out!"

Gulliver's eyes were filmed. He looked at Tom and tried to speak, but he was inarticulate. The boy guided the staggering giant to the porthole.

"Now," he said, "breathe deep! Get some fresh air!"

Night air came through the portholes, pushing the evil fumes ahead of it through the open cabin door and out the hatch at the end of the companionway. The air was clearing rapidly.

Gulliver turned from the opening after a period of gasping and coughing. He was pale but composed.

"Th-that stuff," he said. "It darned near got me." He looked gratefully at Tom. "If it hadn't been for yo', Tom—"

Tom interrupted, "We've got to see about that man on the bed. He's probably Jim Broderick."

Gulliver nodded and moved to the side of the motionless figure.

"Still stinks pretty bad in here," he observed, "but it's tolerable."

"Wait!" cried Tom. "I see something that will help!"

He flicked a switch that started an electric fan fastened to a bracket in the corner. Gulliver meanwhile examined Jim Broderick—if it was Broderick—and announced that he was alive.

"Look here," he said to Tom, "feel the top o' his head."

Tom placed a hand on top of the closely cut, crisp hair of sandy hue and felt a sizable lump.

"Someone," said Gulliver, "parted this gent's hair just like they done the captain's. Do yo' feel that egg on his spire?"

"I sure do."

"I don't know why they had to knock him out with all that smell stuff in the room. That'd do it without havin' to crease his skull."

"I," said Tom, "would like to know what that—" he broke off.

"What's the matter?" demanded Gulliver.

Tom pointed beneath the second bed, the empty one. His forehead was wrinkled in perplexity.

"Look, Gulliver. Look right where I'm pointing. Are my eyes playing tricks?"

"I don't know. What is it yo' think yo' see?"

At that moment a wisp of bluish smoke drifted from beneath the bed and curled up past the blanket.

"There it is again!" Tom exclaimed. "That smoke! Do you see it?"

"Sure do!"

Tom crossed the room and dropped to his hands and knees. He reached beneath the bed and pulled out a box. It was a well-made wooden box about eighteen inches long and six inches in each of the other dimensions. There was a hinged lid held down by a hasp. Thin smoke seeped from beneath the lid.

"Maybe this is what we smell!"

"Lemme see!" said Gulliver, reaching for the box. He held it beneath his nose, took a breath, choked and exclaimed, "Thunderation! This is it!" and headed for a porthole.

"Wait!" cried Tom. "Don't throw it out! Let's see what it is!"

But he was too late. The mysterious box was gone—through the porthole and into the blackness of the night.

CHAPTER 6

The Indian's Message

THERE was little that could be done for Jim Broderick after Gulliver had brought him from below and placed him on the deck beside the still unconscious Captain Laraby.

Whiz Walton loosened his friend's collar and necktie and applied wet cloths to his face while Gulliver examined the lump on Broderick's head by the light of the electric torch.

The big man's fingers were surprisingly gentle as he parted the sandy hair and studied the scalp carefully.

"Skin ain't broken," he observed. "I reckon there's

not much we can do but keep yo' friend comfortable. When he comes to, he'll likely have a whangdinger of a headache. Did Laraby stir while me an' Tom was down below?"

"Didn't move a muscle."

Gulliver thought for a moment, then muttered, "I wonder."

"You wonder what?" demanded Whiz.

"I'm wonderin' what that sweet-smellin' smoke is made from."

The reporter looked up sharply. "What are you talking about?" he asked.

"Them vapors."

"What vapors?"

"I forgot to tell yo'. When we opened the door to the room where Broderick was lyin', the place was full o' the same smell that we got in the wheelhouse, only more so. I got a couple o' full-up lungs an' got wobbly on my legs. I was pulin' as a sick kitten; didn't even have the strength to lift Broderick off'n the bed."

The reporter listened attentively while Gulliver narrated the episode of the mysterious wooden box. Neither of the two noticed that Tom Quest had gone to the wheelhouse and, after opening several of the windows, was poking into drawers and lockers.

"What was in the box?" demanded the reporter when Gulliver finished.

"I don't know. All I know is what it smelled like, an' how it hit me. A good deep breath o' that stuff at full strength has got a way o' hog-tyin' a man's curiosity."

"Where is the box?"

"I heaved 'er out the window."

"Out the window! You big oaf! That box might have held important clues! Obviously those vapors were poisonous. If we knew what made them, maybe we could do more than squat here with our fingers crossed hoping the fresh air will make Broderick snap out of it!"

Gulliver nodded meekly. "Go on, Whiz. I reckon I deserve a goin' over. Tom yelled an' tried to stop me from gittin' rid o' that box, but I had my bristles up an' warn't payin' heed to nothin'."

The columnist looked around. "Where," he said, "is Tom?"

Gulliver bounced to his feet. "That boy! If he's gone lookin' around on his own—"

Tom's voice came from the wheelhouse door. "Hey!" he called. "I found it!"

"Tom! Yo' come over here! Keep away from that there wheelhouse! The air is pizen!"

Tom came carrying a wooden box similar to the one thrown out the porthole by Gulliver. He held it to one side at arm's length.

"Don't fool around with that!" cried Gulliver. "Set 'er down!"

Tom obeyed, setting the box on the deck, a couple of yards from where the two unconscious men were lying.

"Yo' oughtta known better than to go into that wheelhouse!"

"It's all right now, Gulliver. When I went in, I held my breath until I got some windows open."

Thin fumes curled from beneath the lid of the box as Whiz Walton stared fascinated.

"I wonder what that thing holds," he muttered.

"There's one way to find out." Gulliver picked up the box and studied it.

"Where'd yo' find it?" he asked.

"It was in the chart case. I remembered smelling the stuff in the wheelhouse and thought there might be a box like the one you threw out."

The lid of the box was held down by a metal strap that fitted over a small loop designed to hold a lock. Gulliver flipped back the hasp, held the box far out and threw back the lid, releasing a small cloud of pale smoke.

"Don't breathe none o' that!" he warned, setting the box down on deck. "Gimme that flashlight."

The box was lined with metal. It held a number of white cakes resembling small bars of soap about the size of those found in hotel bedrooms.

"Be careful," warned Whiz, as Gulliver reached in to pick up one of the cakes. "I wouldn't handle that stuff."

"Ouch!" cried Gulliver, snapping back his hand.

"What's the matter?" asked Tom.

"Hot! That thing's hotter'n a firecracker!"

"Better leave it alone," said Whiz. "Let someone who knows what he's doing examine it."

"We'll leave 'er here for the time bein' an' git on with our job. We got some more lookin' around to do. If yo' ask me, I'll tell yo' we ain't found all there is to find on this ship."

"How far did you get?"

"We looked in the four cabins below deck," replied Tom. "We still have the stern deck and the hold to inspect."

"Ain't much on the stern deck. I gave that a goin' over when we went past in the motorboat. We'll have a look at the hold." Gulliver hitched his belt. "Come on, Tom. After what happened last time, I reckon I need yo' along to keep me from goin' whoofy—"

"And," added Whiz Walton dryly, "to keep you from tossing any more discoveries out the porthole. Wait a minute, Tom," added the newspaperman. "One of you fellows better report to me every few minutes. I want to be here when Broderick and the captain come to, but I also want to know how you two are making out down in the hold."

Just then a shout came across the water from the *Smackover X*. The skipper evidently was getting impatient. Gulliver cupped his hands around his mouth

and let out a bellow that must have rattled the plates on the tables of the Roney Plaza in Miami. In retaliation the peppery skipper promptly turned off the *Smack-over's* searchlight. But at another roar from Gulliver the light went on again.

On the way to the hold, Tom Quest and Gulliver gave each of the four cabins another brief inspection. Then, at the end of the companionway, they found a hatch set flush in the floor. Opening this, they saw a flight of stairs leading to the dark hold of the *New Granada*, below the water line.

Gulliver led the way down the stairs. At the bottom, he paused and swung the electric torch in all directions.

Tom Quest sniffed carefully. The air was damp and musty, but there was no trace of the sweet vapors.

"I guess," he said, "it's all right to go ahead."

"There's somethin' on the left that looks downright interestin'," Gulliver observed.

He and Tom followed the beam of the electric torch to a vaultlike object about six feet square, that backed against the portside of the hold, reaching from the floor to the ceiling. It appeared to be made of heavy metal. A system of pipes connected the base of the big box to an air compressor powered by an electric motor, neither of which were in operation.

Tom found an electric light bulb dangling from the ceiling and turned it on.

"If it weren't for that machinery," he said, "I'd think this was some sort of storage vault." He gripped a brass handle. "I wonder if it opens."

The handle turned easily. The front of the vault swung out on well-oiled hinges.

A lighted bulb, protected by a heavy glass globe, was set in the ceiling. Deep-sea diving paraphernalia hung on a rack. There were a lot of things in the vault, but Tom noticed none of them. Something else caught and held his attention.

A Seminole Indian with wide-open, staring eyes sat on the floor. He would have collapsed if his back had not been supported by the corners of the vault, because the man was dead.

Gulliver lifted the still body from the vault, placed it on the floor and felt for a pulse. Finding none, he polished the back of his big nickel-plated watch and held it close to the Indian's nose and mouth, but the watch remained unclouded.

"The pore critter's dead all right," Gulliver decided. Then, remembering Jim Broderick and Captain Laraby, he examined the top of the Indian's head. There was no bump or other sign of violence.

"He probably suffocated in that vault," said Tom.

"Let's see what's in there."

In addition to the canvas diving suit, there were lead-weighted boots, a helmet and a supply of rope. There

was a compact set of tools fitted to a belt that could be worn outside the diving suit. A small but highly efficient underwater blowtorch stood in a corner. At the rear of the vault was another door, much like the first.

"That door," Tom said, "must open into the water."

"Yo're right," agreed Gulliver. "This here room is an air lock. A diver can go from here right out into the water instead o' goin' down from the deck. He'd git into these divin' duds, step into this room, an' close the door. Then water'd be pumped in 'til the room was full up. After that, all he had to do was open the outer door an' step out an' down. He'd come back the same way, closin' the outer door behind him an' waitin' 'til the water was pumped out." He pointed to a rope ladder resting coiled up on a shelf. "Chances are," he went on, "he went up an' down on that there ladder."

He scratched his chin reflectively. "There's just one thing I can't figure out."

"What's that?"

"O' course, I don't know nothin' about sea divin', but I've seen pictures o' divers at work, an' there's always air lines runnin' up from their helmets."

"That's old-fashioned diving equipment," Tom said. "This is a modern outfit. The diver takes his air supply down with him in a small tank. He can't stay down as long, but it's a lot handier." He examined a tank fastened to the back of the canvas coverall. "Here's the

tank," he went on. "The valve is open. They probably fill it with air just before it's used."

"We figured there'd have to be at least two men in the crew to handle this here ship," Gulliver said. "There was two bunks used in that cabin."

"Maybe the dead Indian was one of the crew."

"Maybe—or maybe not. In any case, there's likely to be another man on board this—this—muddy ghost ship!"

Tom looked at the figure on the floor and wondered what circumstances had led up to his death. The steel door could not be closed and the handle turned from the inside. Someone must have locked the Indian in the vault with murder in mind. This left the victim to choose between suffocation, or death by drowning merely by opening the outer door to let the sea rush in. The boy's sympathies went out to the dead Seminole, who had been virtually entombed alive.

Something glinted in the dead man's hand. It was a knife still clutched by lifeless fingers.

"I'll git it," volunteered Gulliver.

He squatted and worked the three-inch blade out of the Indian's grip, then muttered, "That's curious."

"What is?" asked Tom.

Gulliver pointed to the brown forearm beneath the rolled-up sleeves.

"That there mark."

"It's tattooing."

"Sure it is, but take a close look."

The tattooed figure was a little over an inch in its widest dimension. It resembled a full-grown cypress tree with spreading branches and a sturdy trunk.

Tom examined the figure more closely. The design was crude, but the outline of a cypress tree was unmistakable.

"Well, it's queer as all get out. But we got to git gittin' an' go through the rest o' this boat." Gulliver rose to his feet.

"I wonder," Tom said, "what the Indian was doing with the knife."

Gulliver shrugged his shoulders.

"If I were in his position, locked in that vault, and had a knife—" Tom had inherited his father's knack of projecting himself, of placing himself in the position of another and reasoning what steps logic would dictate. "I suppose I'd try to force the bolt on the door."

He looked in the vicinity of the bolts but saw no sign of scratches in the paint. He turned, and for the first time noticed the inside of the door. It was one large panel finished with glossy, dark-green paint, but the paint had been marred by crude drawings scratched into the surface with a sharp point. There were two drawings —one above the other. The top figure was a replica of

the tattoo on the Indian's forearm. *A full-grown cypress tree, with spreading branches and a sturdy trunk.* The lower sketch portrayed the same tree cut down. The trunk and all the branches lay horizontally beside the stump.

"Now what in tarnation do yo' make o' that?" said Gulliver at Tom's shoulder.

"I wish I knew, Gulliver. The Indian wanted someone to notice the stump." Tom pointed to an arrow. "See here. He has an arrow pointing to it."

Gulliver scratched his chin. "A cypress stump. That don't make no sense."

"It must be important. The Indian did it as he was dying. He wanted to leave a message of some sort."

"We don't know that the redskin did it. Maybe it's been there for some time."

Tom brushed his hand across the scratches and showed Gulliver loose flakes of paint on his finger tips. "These," he said, "would have been washed off the first time the air lock was filled with water."

"Instead o' drawin' pictures, why didn't that critter write a message?" Gulliver argued.

"He did."

"That?" Gulliver pointed to the door.

Tom nodded. "Few Seminoles know how to write our language," he said. "They do their writing in pic-

tures. We have a clue of some kind, Gulliver, but we can't read the Indian writing. Maybe Dad can help us decipher the clue of the cypress stump."

"Tom! Gulliver! Help!"

It was Whiz Walton shouting. He sounded far off, and there was a note of frenzy in his voice.

Tom Quest was already at the stairs, with Gulliver lumbering behind.

"We're coming," shouted Tom, streaking along the companionway, past the cabin doors.

"Lemme go first," boomed Gulliver, whose huge boots were pounding the floor. But Tom was at the stairs. He went up three at a time, and as he hit the deck, he saw that the reporter had more trouble than he could handle!

CHAPTER 7

The End of the *New Granada*

After Tom and Gulliver left the deck to carry their search into the hold of the *New Granada*, Whiz Walton had given undivided attention to his friend, Jim Broderick.

"Snap out of it, Jim," he said, even though he knew that the man could not hear him. "You've been knocked out before. Get up and fight."

Broderick's eyes remained closed. The reporter dipped his handkerchief into a water bucket labeled "Fire Only," wrung it out and held it to the back of Broderick's neck. He felt the pulse for the fourth time.

It was regular and steady. He listened to the respiration of his fricnd. There was nothing more that he could do. He felt helpless and wished Tom and Gulliver would hurry back so Jim could be taken ashore and given medical attention.

He was quite unaware of the fact that Captain Laraby was regaining consciousness. The captain opened his eyes, blinked a few times and turned his head slowly, focusing his gaze on Whiz Walton's back. He raised one arm an inch or so, then let it drop. He closed his eyes again and waited as if for his strength to return.

Whiz Walton was deep in thought, completely oblivious of the man behind him. Walton's thoughts were a thousand miles away. He was remembering the time when he and Jim Broderick were locked in a small room in a Chinese joss house in New York's Chinatown. . . .

The captain pulled down his left sleeve and fumbled for the button on the cuff, but found it torn off. He glowered at Whiz Walton's back, then turned his gaze toward the wooden box resting on the deck a few feet away. He staggered to his feet, breathed deeply, then winced and put his hand to his head, feeling of the lump. He muttered a low curse, and Whiz Walton heard it.

The reporter turned quickly and looked up in surprise. "You've come to!" he exclaimed. "I didn't know—" That was as far as he got.

He was thrown back as Captain Laraby stumbled forward and knocked him over. His head struck the deck with a stunning *thud.*

"I'll show you!" gasped Laraby, closing his fingers on Whiz Walton's throat.

Whiz felt giddy from the blow on the head, and then he was aware of a crushing weight as his antagonist knelt on his chest. He tried to speak, but words would not come.

Then he mustered all his ebbing strength into a sudden violent effort, rolling to one side. For an instant he was free. He shouted for Tom.

Then Laraby was on him again. Whiz struggled valiantly, but he was no match for the maniacal fury of the other. Laraby threw him to his back and once more gripped his throat.

As Tom came through the hatch, he saw Whiz Walton in the act of being strangled. He didn't break his stride. Charging across the deck, he dived headlong, ramming Laraby's side with his shoulder. The force of his charge sent the captain spinning. Tom rolled to his feet with catlike agility and turned to follow up the attack.

"Hold it, Tom!" bellowed Gulliver, elbowing the boy aside. "I'll take over!"

He grabbed the captain's shirt and jerked the still bewildered skipper to his feet. "Yo'," he rumbled, wag-

gling a huge fist, "go calm sudden or I'll twist yo' around 'til yo' can scratch the back o' yo' neck with yo' front teeth!"

Most people, seeing Gulliver for the first time, were somewhat awed, and Captain Laraby was no exception.

"Who—who are you?" he faltered.

Gulliver ignored the question. "What happened, Whiz?" he demanded. "Yo' give the word, an' I'll do things that'll make this coyote wish he'd never been born."

Whiz had gotten to his feet. "I wasn't paying any attention to him," he explained. "I didn't even know he was conscious until I heard him mutter. When I turned, he was on his feet and coming at me." He looked at the captain. "Is your name Laraby?"

The captain nodded and passed his hand across his eyes as if to clear his vision.

"What's the idea of jumping on me?"

"I—I knew something had happened to me, and then I saw Broderick lying there. You're a stranger. I thought you had killed Broderick." He looked dazed and confused but no longer belligerent. Then he turned and blinked in a dazzling glare. "That light—" He pointed to the searchlight. "That—that's a ship, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Whiz.

"It's the *Smackover X* out of Miami," Tom added.

"Who are you?" Laraby asked, looking at Tom.

Tom replied, giving his name and introducing his friends. Laraby's eyes went wide when he heard the reporter's name.

"You're Whiz Walton?"

Whiz nodded. "What about it?"

"Then you're the one—you're Jim Broderick's friend—"

"That's right."

"I—I wish I'd known it before I tried to kill you."

Whiz rubbed his throat and said, "So do I."

"I'm sorry."

"Forget it, Laraby. Just tell us what happened on this ship."

Captain Laraby seemed to have regained most of his poise. His face was stern but not evil. He spoke in a resonant voice that was well controlled.

"Jim Broderick," he said, "could tell you all about me. What happened to him?"

"The same thing that happened to you," replied the columnist. "We found you both unconscious. Now that you've recovered, I'm not so worried about Jim. He'll probably be all right in a little while."

"We were on our course pointing for the eightieth meridian where we were to meet you at midnight. Broderick had been in the wheelhouse with me for some time. Just before dark, he said he was going below. A few minutes later I heard the wheelhouse door open be-

hind me. I thought it was Broderick—and then—" Captain Laraby grinned weakly. "That's as far as I can go," he finished.

Whiz told of the search for the *New Granada*, the finding of the ship drifting without lights, and how the three had boarded her. At this point he broke his narrative with a question. "How many were on board your ship?"

"In addition to Broderick and me, there were two crewmen."

"Was one of them a Seminole Indian?" asked Tom.

Laraby nodded.

"How did you know?" asked Whiz. "Did you find someone else?"

"We found a Seminole," Tom replied. "He had been sealed in an air lock in the hold. He's dead."

"Air lock!" repeated Whiz Walton explosively. His voice was edged. "Laraby, there's a lot that needs explaining. Why is this old tub equipped with radar, loran and all the other latest gadgets? And what about that air lock?"

"I'll tell yo' about that," put in Gulliver. "It's down in the hold, an' there's a complete divin' outfit for workin' under water."

"Under water!" The significance of the air lock struck Whiz Walton forcibly. "Holy mackerel!" he exclaimed. Then, turning, "Gulliver! Waggle your fist before that

bird's nose again and see if you get an honest answer to a question!"

Gulliver nodded grimly and massaged his fist. "Ask yo' question, Whiz. I reckon Laraby is ready to answer honest."

"What do you want to know?" asked Laraby.

"Was this boat used to loot certain ships that went down in shallow water during the war?"

Laraby smiled enigmatically. "It was. Jim Broderick can tell you all about it and about the part I played."

There was a slight popping noise, not much louder than a *puff*. It came from the wooden box containing the soaplike cakes that gave off fumes. It was followed by a sputtering and spitting and a shower of sparks as the contents of the box broke out in flames. While all hands stared wide-eyed, burning liquid oozed from all sides of the box and spread out on the deck.

Tom grabbed the pail of water from beside Jim Broderick and dumped it on the fire. It was the wrong thing to do. The water caused the fire to spread and burn more violently. Moreover, the dry planking beneath the incendiary stuff had begun to burn.

"Smother it!" shouted Whiz.

Laraby ran toward the wheelhouse crying, "There's a fire extinguisher in here!"

"Sand might help!" Tom shouted.

Gulliver had taken off his jacket to beat out the flames

but succeeded only in fanning them to greater fury.

Laraby returned with a tank of foam extinguisher equipped with a spray nozzle. He turned it on, and directed it at the fire which by now was licking at the wheelhouse on one side and the hatch on the other. There was a *swishing* sound as white stuff showered from the extinguisher. The flames beneath the foam subsided but continued smoldering. The wheelhouse, dried by years of hot sun, was going up like tinder, and the fire was moving through the hatch and down the companionway.

"There's only one thing left to do!" cried Gulliver. He picked up Jim Broderick and tossed the detective over his shoulder like a sack of grain. "We got to git off this hoodoo ship, an' we better git gittin' mighty fast!" He was already on his way to the rail where the small boat had been tied.

"Come on, Laraby," said Whiz Walton. "He's right!"

Laraby nodded. "Can't save the ship," he agreed. "That stuff burns like an incendiary bomb."

Tom hesitated. "There might be another man below deck!"

"There's only one way down," replied the captain, pointing to the hatch, which had become an inferno. "And that's it!"

As he spoke a gaping hole appeared in the deck where

the fire had begun. The chemical, smoldering through the film of fire foam, had eaten through the heavy planks and fallen into the engine room below.

Gulliver was standing in the dinghy with Broderick still over his shoulder when the others reached the rail.

"Tom!" the big man roared. "Yo' git down here pronto or I'll come up an' git yo'!"

"We're coming," replied the boy. "Go ahead, Whiz."

"You go first," answered the reporter.

Rather than argue about it, Tom descended to the boat and took his place at the helm. He untied the painter while Laraby and Whiz stepped down.

"Cast off!" cried Gulliver.

Tom started the engine and swung out from the side of the doomed ship. He rounded the stern and headed for the *Smackover* X. When he looked back, flames were shooting high into the night sky from the ancient wooden vessel. She was destined for the bottom. Tom wondered what secrets she would carry with her.

Then he glanced at Laraby. The captain raised his hand slowly and ran his fingers through his hair as he sighed deeply.

A few minutes later they were climbing aboard the *Smackover* X. The flames from the doomed *New Granada* made the night almost as bright as day.

CHAPTER 8

The Detective's Story

THE NOSE of the *Smackover X* pointed at Miami after a lengthy delay.

Whiz Walton had insisted on holding her at sea anchor to watch the *New Granada*, hoping the fire would burn out at the water line and that the wooden vessel would remain afloat. Had that been the case, some clues might have been salvaged. But the columnist's hopes had not been fulfilled. The ancient ship burned violently, sinking lower on an even keel. When the ocean lapped the deck, the bow went down and the stern rose out of the water in a final plunge.

Captain Popple had been increasingly impatient and had expressed his annoyance with some caustic remarks that had brought prompt retorts from Whiz Walton and explosive comments from Gulliver. After that the captain had locked himself in the wheelhouse and remained aloof while guiding the *Smackover X* to port.

Jim Broderick had regained consciousness. He sat in the small, cozy cabin between Tom Quest and Whiz. Captain Laraby was in a corner of the cabin with his bowed head resting on his hands. Gulliver came from the galley with a tray of steaming cups.

"Coffee, tea an' warm milk," he announced. "This'll do yo' good."

He extended a cup to Tom. "Milk," he said. "I put a little butter an' cinnamon in 'er so's she'll go down easier."

Tom said, "Thanks."

"Coffee black for Broderick." Gulliver extended a cup which the detective gratefully accepted.

Whiz took coffee, but Laraby shook his head silently.

Gulliver placed the tray on a convenient table and sat down beside it. He swallowed a cup of scalding coffee in a single gulp and reached for the second. "Now, Whiz," he said, "if yo' friend Broderick is able to give out, I hanker to hear what he's got to say."

"How about it, Jim?" asked Whiz. "Do you feel up to it?"

The redheaded detective nodded. "I'll tell you as much as I know. Maybe you can fill in some gaps. I work for a firm of insurance underwriters. They paid off on a number of boats that went down during the war."

Whiz Walton interrupted. "We know about that part of it," he said. "The ships carried platinum from Colombia. Salvage crews found that the sunken ships had been looted underwater and the platinum stolen. You're trying to locate the pirates and the platinum. Right?"

Broderick nodded.

"Now, go on from there."

"Well, as you know, I spent some time with the FBI and later with the Office of Strategic Services. We had several shreds of information indicating that a gang of foreign agents had established a headquarters somewhere deep in the Everglades.

"We didn't have much, just a hint here and a hint there, but not enough to piece together."

"Wartime spies," broke in Whiz, "would probably be in a position to know about the ships that went down."

Broderick nodded. "Not only that," he said, "but a smart spy ring would know where they went down and what they carried. As a matter of fact, the spies might have had a hand in the sinkings. Just remember what I said about the spies. I'll get back to them later.

"There's no use wasting time explaining how I located Captain Laraby. I found him and his boat in Cuba. When I questioned him, I learned that two men giving the names of Koerner and Gillig had approached him with a proposition."

Laraby looked up and spoke for the first time since coming on board. "I was down and out," he said. "My boat needed a lot of repairs and I didn't have the cash to make them. Koerner and Gillig offered to stand all the expense of putting the *New Granada* into shape if I'd give them a free hand with her.

"We drew up an agreement. They were to do whatever they wanted and engage a two-man crew. For my part, I was to put myself and the ship at their disposal for a period of six months."

Broderick took up the narrative.

"Captain Laraby knew that Koerner and Gillig were going to do salvage work, but he thought it was perfectly legitimate and saw no reason to question the installation of an air lock and modern navigation equipment. He showed me the log of his ship. We compared notes and concluded that Koerner and Gillig were the crooks I wanted. Captain Laraby was willing to co-operate with me. He knew where those two had been living in Cuba. We went to their house, but they were gone."

"Do you think they knew you were after them?" asked Whiz Walton.

"I think they did. They cleared out in a hurry leaving a lot of heavy stuff behind. I found some pamphlets and a heavy case full of books, all of which dealt with the Everglades. References in the pamphlets and books, dealing with Shark River and the Whitewater Bay area, had been marked for particular attention. The most authentic books—the ones that showed most use—had been written by Hamilton Quest."

"My dad," breathed Tom, his eyes bright with pride.

A faint smile twitched the corners of Jim Broderick's mouth. "I had read about you, Tom, and your expedition into Ecuador and Peru. I knew that Whiz had accompanied you, so I got in touch with him and asked him to persuade your father to give me more information about that Whitewater area. Koerner and Gillig had studied that section for a purpose. I think that's where their hide-out is, and I think that it's the same hide-out I mentioned a little while ago—the one that was used by spies during the war.

"After calling Whiz, I spent some time in Cuba looking for Koerner and Gillig, but I couldn't find them or any trace of them. They probably left the island. I called Whiz again and learned that Quest had finished the chart I wanted, so I made a date to meet him tonight."

Broderick leaned back and took a sip of coffee.

"Why did you want to meet us at sea?" asked the reporter.

"I didn't want to give the gang a chance to get at Captain Laraby or the *New Granada*. I planned on keeping both undercover for a time." Broderick grinned wryly. "I guess I underestimated Koerner. He didn't wait for me to come to shore."

"Have you," asked Whiz, "any idea of what happened on board the *New Granada?*"

The detective shook his head. "I don't remember a thing since sunset. We were on our way to meet you. I'd left the wheelhouse to go to my cabin. I was packing up my briefcase. That's the last I know until I opened my eyes in this cabin on the cruiser. As I said when I began, maybe you can fill in for me."

Whiz told how he and his friends had found and boarded the drifting ship, and the subsequent finding of Captain Laraby and the detective. He described the sweet odor and the wooden boxes with the waxy cakes that had burst into flames.

"I can explain those," Broderick said. "Those cakes were developed for use by saboteurs. They're something like phosphorus. Too much of the fumes probably could kill a man. A few whiffs will knock him out. The cakes are harmless under water. When they dry out, they give off the fumes for several hours, then break into flame. It's the hottest kind of fire; it's almost impossible to put out. What you've told me clears up one thing."

"What's that?" asked Whiz.

"It was unlike Koerner and Gillig to leave behind all those references to the Whitewater Bay region. Those men aren't careless. I thought they might have left the stuff to lead me off on a false trail. Now I know they weren't worried about any clues I might find. They didn't intend to let me stay alive to use them. They planned to kill Laraby and me."

"In that case," Tom said, "why didn't they shoot you instead of clubbing you and leaving you in the cabin?"

"They knew the fumes would keep us unconscious until the fire broke out. Then, if our bodies were found, there'd be no sign of bullet or knife wounds to arouse suspicion."

"That brings up the next question," Whiz Walton said.

Broderick emptied his coffee cup. "What's that?" he asked.

"Who knocked you and the captain out? Do you think it was one of the two crew members, or someone who came alongside in another boat?"

"No one came alongside," declared Laraby. "I'm sure of that."

"Then it was one of the crew!"

Gulliver had finished the coffee and was working his way through the hot tea. Now he spoke. "I," he said, "know one o' the crew it warn't."

"What do you mean?" Broderick asked.

"Tom an' me found a Seminole Injun inside the air lock with the door closed."

"Musco," the detective muttered. "He was one of the men Koerner hired."

"Well, he's dead." Gulliver finished simply.

"Who was the other man?" Whiz asked. "Was he an Indian?"

Broderick said, "No. He was a big, rawboned blond." He looked at Gulliver. "He was just about your size."

Gulliver looked incredulous. "I'll stand up," he growled, rising. "Yo' look me over an' guess again."

Broderick eyed the big man carefully from head to toe and back to head. He pursed his lips, then nodded slowly. "Yes," he said. "He was as big as you."

Gulliver sat down. For some unaccountable reason he looked offended. "I'd like to meet up with that galoot," he grumbled. "I'd especially like to meet up with him when I got my back arched an' I'm in one o' my sod-pawin', horn-tossin' moods." His voice trailed off, but his lips kept moving, as if he were talking to himself.

"What's the name of the blond giant?" asked Whiz Walton.

"Kurt Dorgan."

"How do you suppose he got away from the *New Granada*?"

Broderick answered with a question. "Did you find a runabout swinging on davits?"

"I didn't see one," Whiz replied. He looked at Tom. "Did you?"

"There wasn't one," the boy stated. "I saw the davits right above the rope ladder we used. But they were empty."

"Then that's how Dorgan got away," decided the detective.

"What's the next move, Jim?" asked Whiz.

"I don't know. Before we left Cuba, I had a long talk with Musco and Dorgan. I showed them where they stood, and they both agreed to help me get the ringleaders and recover the stolen platinum. Maybe I was a fool to trust them, but we were in Cuba, and I didn't know how much co-operation I'd get from the authorities. A private detective doesn't get nearly as far as a government man."

"Maybe you can find Dorgan somewhere along the coast."

"I don't want to waste much time on him, Whiz. I'm anxious to see if I can find that hide-out in the Everglades. By the way, did you bring the map?"

The reporter said, "Yes, but now that you're going ashore I have a better idea." He turned to Tom. "If Tom thinks it would be all right."

"What is it?" asked Tom.

"Why not let Jim talk to your father and look at the rest of his charts?"

"Swell!" exclaimed the boy enthusiastically. "Dad might be able to help a lot!"

"I got a better idea than that!"

Tom looked at Gulliver in surprise. "What's that, Culliver?"

"Listen," the big man began. "Them lop-eared, double-distilled sidewinders might o' burned us up alive on board that there *New Granada*. We got personal reasons for wantin' to see 'em brought to time. Why don't we all go to Hamilton Quest, git all the information we can, then go man-huntin' along with Jim Broderick?"

"Sounds good to me!" said Whiz.

"Now you're talking!" Tom exclaimed.

"How about it, Jim?" Gulliver demanded. "Yo' got any objections to havin' three fightin' men on yo' side?"

"After what I read about you and Tom Quest in the jungles of Ecuador and Peru," the detective said calmly, "I can't think of anyone I'd rather have on my side."

"Then that settles it. Maybe," and Gulliver looked hopeful, "we'll meet up with this yaller-haired headcracker."

Broderick glanced at his wrist watch. "Four A.M.," he announced. "Does anyone know what time we'll dock?"

"I'll ask Captain Popple," offered Tom.

"Don't bother the old coot. I can tell yo'. We'll be hittin' Miami in about two hours."

"In that case, I move we all turn in and catch a little

sleep. Present indications are that we'll have a lot to do after we touch shore."

Broderick's suggestion was welcomed by everyone but Tom, who felt not the slightest desire to go to sleep. He had no chance to voice his opinion. Gulliver took up the suggestion and gave orders.

"There's two cabins for sleepin'. Whiz, yo' an' Broderick an' Cap'n Laraby can pull down the bunks in this one. Me an' Tom will take the small one back o' the galley." Gulliver looked at Tom, and his expression told the boy that he had something to impart that he didn't want the others to hear.

"Come on, Tom," he said. "Two hours ain't long for sleepin'."

CHAPTER 9

Gulliver Draws a Picture

Tom closed the cabin door and sat down on the edge of the bunk. Gulliver was on the other bunk pulling off his heavy boots. He tossed them to the floor, leaned back against the wall with his hands clasped behind his head, and wiggled his toes encased in thick woolen socks. He stuck his legs out straight and admired his feet for a moment, then said, "Tom, in all that confab there warn't no mention made o' any cypress tree."

"What about it, Gulliver?"

"Maybe it would be just as well if we kept our lips buttoned up for the time bein'."

"But, Gulliver," Tom exclaimed, "we'll surely have

to tell Whiz and Jim Broderick. This may be the very clue they need."

Gulliver looked unconvinced.

"You're thinking about the drawing on the inside of the air lock?"

The big man nodded.

"I've thought about it a lot too. You and I are the only ones who saw it. Let's not tell Whiz and Broderick till we get to the cottage where we can—"

Gulliver squinted one eye. "Tom, why'd yo' say that? Don't yo' trust Broderick?"

"Oh, sure," Tom said heartily. "I think he's a hundred per cent."

"But yo' don't trust Laraby, is that it?"

"Well—" Tom hesitated. "I don't know about him. Maybe he's all right."

"But yo' don't trust him to the end o' the trail?" persisted Gulliver.

Tom said, "No."

"That's just how I feel. That's why I'm with you all the way about keeping still 'til we talk to yo' dad. Me, I savvy somethin' of Apache an' Cherokee drawin', but Seminole is different."

Tom was on his feet examining the contents of a railed shelf above the bunk.

"What yo' lookin' for?"

"Paper."

"For what?"

"So I won't forget." Tom found a pad of ruled paper —the kind sold for school use. He sat down on the bunk, pulled a pencil from the pocket of his shirt and started sketching.

"I'm going to draw that cypress tree just as we saw it on the inside of the air lock," he said while his pencil moved rapidly.

Gulliver leaned across the two-foot aisle and watched as the sketch developed. Tom drew the trunk and spreading branches of a mature cypress tree, then beneath it the upper part of a tree lying on its side next to the stump. He finished with an arrow pointing to the stump and then reversed the pad so Gulliver could see the sketch right side up.

"Does it look anything like the original?" he asked.

Gulliver studied the sketch for a moment, then tore off Tom's work, saying, "Yo' hang onto this while I have a try at 'er. Lemme borrow yo' pencil."

He gripped the pencil tightly, stuck his tongue out of the side of his mouth, frowned darkly and went to work. The drawing progressed slowly, accompanied by many grunts and grimaces. When it was done, Gulliver held the pad at arm's length and eyed his masterpiece.

"I don't know," he said dubiously. "There's somethin' about 'er that don't ring true. Lemme see yo' picture, Tom."

Tom passed it over. Gulliver held the two drawings side by side.

"What do yo' think, Tom?" he asked. "Which one should we show to yo' dad?"

Tom grinned and said, "Which one do you think?"

"That settles it. Yo' would o' chose mine if I'd been anywhere close."

Gulliver closed the cover of the pad on his drawing and flipped it to the shelf above Tom's bunk.

"Like I said, I don't know much about Seminole writin'. I could o' done better if the critter had been a Texas redskin. We'll take the picture yo' drew to show yo' dad. Now yo' better lie back on that there bunk an' git some rest."

Tom lay back and looked at the ceiling of the small room. "Gosh," he murmured, "it will be great to help Jim Broderick look for those platinum thieves."

The boy was more tired than he realized. The soft purr of the cruiser and the swish of water just beyond the porthole were like a lullaby. His eyes grew heavy with drowsiness, and presently he slept to dream of a cypress stump.

But in his dream there was no intimation of the dire things that were to come to pass as a result of the sketch Gulliver had left in the pad resting on the shelf above Tom's head.

CHAPTER 10

The Blond Giant

TWO MOTORBOATS put out from an isolated cove in the first faint light of dawn. The empty boat was towed. In the other craft, a blond man, who would have stood six inches over six feet and who had shoulders like those of a man wearing football pads, sat at the wheel.

He cut the motor three miles from shore where the water was deep. Climbing to the stern, he untied the painter and pulled the trailing boat, with an outboard motor, alongside.

Striking a match on the seat of his trousers, he lighted a length of fuse that extended from a locker. When it sputtered, he transferred without haste to the smaller boat, started the outboard and pulled away.

When he heard the explosion he grinned. "Now," he said to himself, "let 'em try to find the boat that brought me from the *New Granada*." Kurt Dorgan chuckled softly and headed toward shore to await the arrival of the *Smackover X*.

Daybreak generally found a number of men in small boats at anchor near the shore, trying to confirm the claims of the chamber of commerce.

When Kurt Dorgan anchored the outboard and cast a line near the place where the *Smackover X* was usually moored, he became just one more black speck on a wide expanse of coastal water. He could not have chosen a more effective means of keeping inconspicuous.

Not that he had any particular desire to hide. He hadn't thought of hiding. So far as he knew, there was no need to stay out of sight. Captain Laraby, the Indian named Musco and Broderick were the only ones who could associate him with the undersea pirates, and those three by now were dead. Dorgan glanced at his watch. According to his calculations, they should have been dead for the past eight hours or longer.

Hunched forward in his seat and holding a line on which there was no bait, the blond giant reviewed the past few days to see if anywhere along the march of recent events he had made a slip or left a loophole.

He remembered the scene in Cuba when Jim Brod-

erick had called on Captain Laraby and the two members of the crew with evidence that couldn't be denied. Laraby had wilted easily and made all manner of promises to the detective. So had Musco, the Indian. He, Dorgan, had made promises, too, but with mental reservations.

At the first opportunity, he had reported secretly to the coleaders of the gang. Koerner and Gillig had listened to the story of Broderick's success with cold, thin-lipped impassivity.

They had discussed the emergency, and each word of the discussion was indelibly impressed on Dorgan's mind. Time, they had decided, was a factor; immediate flight was indicated. They would have to travel light, with a minimum of luggage. Moreover, they would have to take steps to see that Broderick continued his search no longer. They had concluded that Laraby's usefulness was ended. Neither he nor his ship nor, for that matter, Musco, would be needed any longer. They, with Broderick, were marked for liquidation.

Koerner, more ruthless than Gillig, was for quickly disposing of the trio with a knife or gun. Gillig had argued against this. "A murder," he had said, "starts the police on a man hunt. Those three must die, but in such a way that no one will suspect that they have been murdered."

The discussion had terminated with Dorgan being

given an assignment and two boxes holding incendiary chemicals, with instructions for their use.

Koerner and Gillig had left Cuba the same day, but Dorgan had been forced to wait for many days, feigning loyalty to Captain Laraby and Broderick while the detective conducted his futile search.

Dorgan chuckled as he remembered the way Jim Broderick had sought in vain for Koerner and Gillig. He shifted his weight in the small boat and flipped his fish line to the other side. He saw a cruiser pointing in, but it was a long way off and had the rising sun behind it. He'd have to wait to learn whether or not it was the *Smackover X.*

His mind returned to past events—to the sneaking on board of the wooden boxes and the departure from Cuba.

There had been several radio conversations between Broderick and shore. All Dorgan had been able to learn from these was that the *New Granada* was to keep a rendezvous at midnight with someone who would arrive on the *Smackover X.* Someone. Who was someone? A Federal man? A representative of the insurance underwriters? Another detective? It didn't matter. The contents of the wooden boxes would prevent that rendezvous.

The incoming cruiser was nearer but still too far off for identification.

What a simple matter it had been to dispose of the *New Granada*. Pushing Musco into the vault—nothing to it. He had had some doubts about overpowering Broderick, but these had been dispelled when he had managed to slip into the detective's cabin unobserved. A quick, sharp tap on the head with a short length of padded iron had done the trick. Captain Laraby had been knocked out just as easily. After that, he had only to dump the water from the tin-lined boxes and leave them where the fire would find plenty of inflammable material—a mattress, for example, or a locker full of paper charts.

Because of the midnight meeting he had had to do all this earlier than originally intended. Then he had remained on board the *New Granada* to make sure the small white cakes would carry out their purpose. They had been a long time drying out. Captain Laraby had begun to stir with returning consciousness before the anesthetic fumes started to escape from the wooden boxes. The vapor had begun to seep from the boxes just in time. After that it had merely been a case of cutting off the engines and the lights, then leaving the doomed ship, confident that if the fire happened to attract another ship in the vicinity, the murderer by that time would be miles away. That was the advantage of the slow-acting incendiary cakes over the less subtle method of starting the fire by hand.

"It's the *Smackover!*" Dorgan exclaimed suddenly.

He flipped his line and watched with interest as Captain Popple's cruiser moved in and tied up at a dock, and then his eyes went wide with incredulity. The first to leave the *Smackover X* was a man he knew; and so was the second.

"Laraby and Broderick!" he muttered. "They're alive!"

He jerked his hat lower on his face and bent down in the small boat while he watched a boy of seventeen, a man of Broderick's physique, and a big man as large as himself step to the dock.

Dorgan was angry and afraid. Koerner and Gillig had ordered him to kill and he had failed. Those cold schemers had no patience with failure.

"I'll get them yet," he vowed.

A fly lit on his bare forearm. He slapped viciously, flattening the insect. On the arm, where the fly had been, there remained a smear of blood—beneath the trunk of a tattooed cypress tree!

CHAPTER 11

Captain Popple Talks

THE *Smackover X's* recent passengers divided into two groups for the drive from Miami to the rented house where Hamilton Quest was waiting. Gulliver accompanied Captain Laraby in the first taxicab, and Tom sat between Whiz Walton and Jim Broderick in the other.

Though half an hour had passed since Whiz had paid for the use of the cruiser and said good-bye to the frowning skipper, Captain Popple was still talking to himself. Most of the disgruntled mouthings, spiced by salty and original expressions, concerned Gulliver and his Neanderthal bulk.

"Outsize whaleback," fussed the old man, slapping at brass with a polishing cloth. "Takin' off my cap, pattin' my head an' callin' me 'Shaggy.' Fer two cents I'd o' forgot his size an' popped him on the nose—or part of it!" he corrected.

He glared around the larger cabin, then moved with his cleaning equipment to the galley. The sight that met his eyes brought a howl as of mortal pain.

The small sink was stacked to the top with cups and saucers, and, on top of these, plates, four empty milk bottles and cooking utensils. The litter overflowed the sink and spread out to the flat-topped range. The coffeepot was filled with silverware and rested, perfectly balanced, on top of a glass teapot filled with eggshells.

"That—that overgrown octopus!" sputtered Captain Popple. "That puffed-up porpoise! 'Can I make a cup o' coffee?' he says—'or maybe a pot o' tea?' 'Yes,' I says back, an' what's he do!"

He jerked open the door of the refrigerator set beneath the range. "Oh, my!" he groaned. "Three dozen eggs, two quarts of milk, a pound of butter, two loaves of bread! They couldn't o' et that much! Two pints of cream, a pound o' bacon! They just couldn't!"

He stood back, his arms hanging limp at his sides. "Cleaned out!" he said despairingly. "Not enough left fer my own breakfast, an' me with the appetite of a

canary! Serves me right fer lockin' myself in the wheel-house an' givin' that gorilla a free hand!"

He took off his hat and caressed his shiny head. "But maybe," he mused, "it's a good thing I was locked in. He might o' et me."

The little skipper turned quickly when he noticed a slight movement of the boat.

"Now who's comin'?" he muttered.

The door swung back and a huge bulk filled the opening. For a moment Captain Popple thought Gulliver had returned. He sighed with relief when he saw that the visitor was a stranger. He was as large as Gulliver, but his hair was light, his eyes blue.

Kurt Dorgan said, "Good morning."

"Howdy, stranger."

"This cruiser is available for charter, isn't it?"

"Not right now! Just got back from an all-night trip. I've got to clean 'er, polish 'er, gas 'er, oil 'er an' stock 'er."

Dorgan reached behind his back and closed the door. He nodded slowly. "Last night," he said. "That's what I want to talk about. What happened?"

"Can't see as it's any o' your business," the little man said testily.

"I have a way," Dorgan advanced two paces, "of making things my business."

One hand shot out like a striking serpent and the brawny fingers closed around the captain's skinny throat.

"I asked a question. I want an answer."

"Le—lemme go!" Captain Popple's eyes were wide with terror. "Lemme go! You can't do this!" he gasped as the fingers tightened. His arms thrashed wildly.

"Are you ready to talk?"

"I—I'll talk!" There was a choke in the voice.

Kurt Dorgan pushed the little old man into a chair. "I want to know who you took out, where you went and what happened!"

Captain Popple was willing to oblige. He detailed the night's adventure from his point of view. "I just followed orders," he said, "an' held my searchlight on the *New Granada.* She broke out in flames an' a minute later the boy an' his two friends came back, bringin' with 'em Cap'n Laraby an' the redheaded man—the last named bein' unconscious. They called him Broderick."

Dorgan's face had remained bland and impassive during the recital. Now he gave an almost imperceptible nod. "The fire," he muttered, "came too late."

"What did you say?"

"Nothing."

"But I thought you—"

"Where," interrupted Dorgan, "did they go from here?"

"They all seemed to be friends o' the boy, and a nice lad he is, too. Quest's the name. Tom Quest. Father's got a place on the coast south o' here."

"What was it you called the boy?"

"Quest."

The name struck sparks in Dorgan's mind. "Is he related," he asked slowly, "to Hamilton Quest?"

Captain Popple's head bobbed in the affirmative. "That's his father."

"He writes books?"

"Yep."

"About the Everglades?"

"Yep. Now will you clear out an' lemme get on with my work?"

"Maybe."

"What do you mean, 'maybe'?"

"First I want to look around—"

"Now you see here! This is my ship—"

Dorgan drew a length of thin nylon cord from his pocket. "I want to look around," he repeated.

His moves were like lightning. He jerked the skipper to his feet, twisted his lean arms behind his back and deftly drew a loop around crossed wrists.

Captain Popple's fluent cursing made up for physical restriction.

"If you keep yelling," warned Dorgan smoothly, "I'll have to silence you."

"I'll have the law on you for this!" screamed the spunky captain. "This is piracy! Assault an' battery! This is mayhem! What's more, it's illegal!" His voice had reached shrill peaks that were cut off by an open-handed slap that turned his whole brain into a single shooting star. He fell back to the seat, dazed and exhausted.

Dorgan kept the captain by his side as he went through the cruiser. A cunning plan had formed in the giant's mind. It was a plan that would mollify the rage of Koerner and Gillig when they learned that Laraby and Broderick were still alive.

By this time the facts in Broderick's possession probably had been made known to others. It was too late for a double murder to insure the security of the platinum thieves. Murder at this stage of the game would have to be sixfold. And even then, with Gulliver, Whiz, Tom Quest and his father as well as Broderick and Laraby silenced, there was the possibility that the information had been spread to others.

Murder, Dorgan decided, was out.

His plan was better.

To carry it out, he would have to make some purchases. The cruiser needed fuel and water. The larder needed restocking, and there might be other things. He'd have to make a list of items to buy. He found a pencil in his pocket, then cast about for paper. There

was a pad on the shelf above a bunk in the stern cabin. He got it, and when he flipped back the cover, he stared wide-eyed at a crudely drawn cypress tree—and beneath it, a cypress stump.

"Who," he demanded, showing the pad to Captain Popple, "drew this?"

The small man shook his head and murmured, "Dunno."

"Who slept in this bunk?"

"The boy. Tom Quest."

Kurt Dorgan ripped off Gulliver's sketch, folded it and stuck it in a pocket.

"Tom Quest," he said, "has something to explain."

CHAPTER 12

Kidnaped

THE YEARS had rolled back. At least that was how it seemed to Hamilton Quest as he sat before a wall map. Over a decade had passed since his days as a professor of mathematics. Today, he planned to give his pupils information concerning a specific part of Florida, and the Seminoles who lived there. Tom and Gulliver, Whiz Walton, Broderick and Captain Laraby comprised the class that met in the library.

The meeting had come about after Tom and the others had told about the night's adventure and announced their decision to help Jim Broderick search for the thieves' hide-out.

Hamilton Quest had been particularly interested to

learn that books he had written had been used for reference by Koerner.

"As long as you are determined to go into the Everglades," he began, "the more you know about them, the safer you will be. I would like to go with you, but frankly, I am not quite up to it physically."

On the map he drew a circle around Whitewater Bay and the adjoining mainland. "You think the hideout is somewhere inside this circle. Is that right?"

Jim Broderick said, "Yes."

Quest pointed to the map of southern Florida. "Look at this map," he said. "It is like all maps of Florida. The cartographers have worked without benefit of exploration. More than two thousand square miles of Everglades are marked by nothing more than bird tracks to indicate swamp. Aside from the outline and the coastal creeks, we have here less informative detail than a map of Mars."

He moved to another map thumbtacked to the wall —the one he had prepared for Whiz to take to Broderick. "On this," he continued, "you will find trails and villages. It is a long time since I explored the region, but I think you will find it much as I have indicated.

"The Seminoles who live there are apart from the rest of the world. They have remained unchanged for over a hundred years.

"You can reach this area in two ways. By land you

can drive to Homestead and a little beyond. From the end of the road, it is slightly over twenty miles, the longest twenty miles you ever saw, to the village of Chief Osceola."

"Osceola!" broke in Tom. "He was a leader of the Seminoles away back in the eighteen-thirties."

Hamilton Quest nodded and smiled thinly. "The original Osceola," he said, "outwitted seven generals in the United States Army and for seven years defeated all attempts made by troops to penetrate the swamps in the war against the Seminoles. The present chief of this tribe is named after the original Osceola.

"As I said," he continued, pointing to the chart, "the settlement is located right here and can be reached by land. Traveling by water, this route might be followed." Using a pencil as a pointer, the explorer traced a route around the southern shore between the many islets and keys and into Whitewater Bay, past the mouth of Shark River. The pencil stopped at a snakelike line. "Maps do not give much importance to this stream, but it is wide and deep enough to be navigable, and, as you see" —the pencil followed the stream—"it flows inland for quite a distance to within a few miles of Osceola's village. The trip by land, though harder, is much shorter. I suggest you speak to Osceola. He will know if the men you seek are hidden anywhere in his vicinity."

Hamilton Quest continued his lecture, outlining trails and danger places, and describing the swampland in great detail. He told about all natural hazards, the quicksand, the mud, the difficulties of travel. He described the creatures that might be met and displayed life-size illustrations of diamondback rattlers and moccasins.

Noon came and went. It was midafternoon before the meeting finally adjourned.

Laraby decided to take a nap, and Broderick went with him. Whiz Walton and Gulliver took the jeep into Miami to buy supplies for the expedition. Tom joined his father on the veranda.

Hamilton Quest smiled at his son. "Do you think you know something now about the swampland?"

"Gosh, Dad, you sure crammed us full."

"If you have time, it wouldn't do any harm to read a couple of notebooks."

"I'm going to. But there's something I want to talk about."

Quest inclined his head.

"We didn't tell you everything that happened on the *New Granada*."

"Held out on the old man, eh?"

"Gulliver and I found something—we didn't even tell Broderick or Whiz Walton about it."

"Why not?"

"Well—I wanted to speak to you first. We told you about the Seminole Indian in the air lock."

"Yes."

"Before he died, he scratched something on the inside of the door."

"The air-lock door?"

Tom nodded as he reached into his pocket for the folded sketch he had made aboard the cruiser.

"There was a cypress tree tattooed on the arm of the dead Indian. Does a cypress tree have any particular significance?"

"None that I know of," replied the scientist promptly. "Stay on the subject, Tom. You were speaking of something scratched on the inside of the air lock."

Tom unfolded the paper. "This is how it looked," he said.

Quest examined the two sketches, one of a standing tree, and one of the stump, with the tree beside it. "What is this?" he asked, pointing to the arrow.

"That's the way the air-lock door looked. There was an arrow just like that."

"It points to the cypress stump."

Tom said, "I thought it might be Seminole picture writing."

Quest shook his head slowly.

"But there must have been some reason for drawing the picture," Tom argued.

"I wish I could help you, Tom." His father folded and returned the sketch. "Before you start on your expedition you'll have to show this to Whiz. And when you get to the Seminole village show it to Osceola. He may shed some light on it. And by the way, son." He took Tom's hand.

"Yes, Dad?"

"Show Osceola your ring." He touched the mounted spiral. "He will recognize it."

"He will?" asked Tom in surprise.

"I made the original design while visiting Osceola in his village; carved it out of a piece of cypress. Osceola liked it, considered it a charm, so I let him keep the pattern."

Before Tom went to bed that night he laid out high leather boots, woolen socks, khaki trousers and a shirt so that he would lose no time in getting ready to start out at daybreak. He went to bed early and fell asleep almost instantly.

He didn't know how long he had been sleeping when he was roused by an oppressive weight. Something like a towel was pressing on his nose and mouth. He tried to rise, but a heavy hand pinned him to the bed.

By the moonlight spilling into the room, he saw a

man as big as Gulliver. When he tried to cry out, something pungent filled his lungs. It seemed to push up into his brain.

He struggled, but his efforts were weak. A giddiness assailed him. White lights, dancing before his eyes, burst into brilliant streamers, and, as they faded, blackness closed in. The boy went limp.

Kurt Dorgan tossed aside the towel saturated with anesthetic. He picked up the laid-out clothing and the boots, then picked up Tom. With the unconscious boy over his shoulder, he stepped through the French windows and made his way to an outboard tied at the dock.

"Now to get back to the *Smackover X*," he muttered, placing Tom on the floor of the boat. "Then we'll put out for the cypress stump."

CHAPTER 13

Bound for the Cypress Stump

EVERYONE was up and dressed at dawn and ready for a hearty breakfast. Everyone, that is, except Tom Quest.

" 'Tain't like Tom to oversleep on a mornin' like this," Gulliver observed. "Reckon he must o' been plumb wore out."

"I'll call him," Hamilton Quest said. "He'll be showered and dressed in less than five minutes."

"Yo' stay here. I'll go git him." Gulliver crossed the dining room, went through a small hall and rapped on the door of the back room where Tom slept. Getting no response, he opened the door.

The bed was in disorder, and empty.

"Must've stole a jump on us," mused the big man. "Likely got up early an' went for a swim." He looked through the screen doors at the beach, flooded with a roseate hue. "Don't see no sign o' him."

A towel lay at his feet. He picked it up and turned when he heard Hamilton Quest speak from the doorway.

"Where is he?"

"I reckon he got up an' went for a swim, then come back an' showered off. He left a towel here by the door."

Quest glanced around the room. "His clothes are gone," he said.

"Yep. He must o' dressed. Maybe he went for a walk." Gulliver paused. "But that ain't like Tom. He'd o' stopped long enough to eat." He looked at the crumpled towel and spread it wide. " 'Tain't like him to leave a towel on the floor neither."

Concern furrowed the father's brow. "Let me see that towel," he said. He examined it. "It's not one of ours."

"It ain't?"

Quest entered the bathroom. "Look here," he said to Gulliver.

Towels were neatly folded and hung on their racks. They were quite dry. The floor of the shower was dry, and so was the basin.

"I've known Tom a long time," Gulliver declared,

"an' doggone it, that boy don't never start out in the mornin' without washin' off. He's often told me his head don't think right 'til he washes off the cobwebs. Somethin' has happened."

Quest still held the towel. He raised it to his face and sniffed. He paled. "Gulliver! Put your nose to this!"

Gulliver inhaled deeply. "There's somethin' on it," he said, "an' it ain't soap!"

"It's chloroform."

"Chloroform!" exploded Gulliver. "That's knockout stuff!"

"He—" Quest's voice faltered. "He has been abducted."

Gulliver was through the door. "Hey! Look here," he yelled a moment later. "I found footprints!"

His shout brought Whiz Walton, followed by Broderick and Captain Laraby. They joined big Gulliver who stood beside a set of footprints as large as he himself might have made. They went in a straight line from the house to the dock and paralleled another set of prints in the opposite direction. The conclusion was obvious, and it was made by Gulliver.

"Some big galoot come by boat an' captured Tom!"

"Some big galoot," repeated Whiz Walton. "Gulliver, those footprints are just as big as yours!"

"Yo'—" began Gulliver.

Broderick cut in sharply. "Kurt Dorgan!" he said.

"Dorgan?" queried Hamilton Quest. "Who is he?"

"The second member of my crew," replied Captain Laraby. "A member of the gang. We were sure he'd escaped."

Gulliver's voice held a menacing rumble. "Now we got to find that blond-haired critter!" His fists were clenched until the knuckles showed white. "We just got to!"

"Broderick," said Whiz, "how well did Dorgan know the ringleaders?"

"Much better than the Indian. Musco was little more than a stooge, but Dorgan seemed to be pretty well informed."

"Do you think he knew where the hide-out was located?"

Broderick said, "Yes, I think he did, and he would probably go there." He turned to Hamilton Quest. "Yesterday you told us it was possible to get pretty far into the Everglades by boat—"

"Your map," Quest said, "is marked with a navigable stream."

"Which is quicker? By boat or through the Everglades on foot?"

"I think," Tom's father said slowly, "better time might be made on foot, but it is very hard going." To Gulliver, he said, "Maybe we had better call the law."

"Go ahead an' call 'em!" retorted the big fellow. "By

the time yo're done sendin' for the law, we'll be on our way. It'll be afternoon before they git through askin' questions an', by thunderation, I aim to be sludgin' my way through the swamp an' gittin' doggoned close to where we're goin' by that time!"

"Hold on," said Whiz. "We're just jumping to conclusions. We don't know for sure that Dorgan took Tom to the hide-out. We have nothing to go on but a hunch!"

"A hunch," retorted Gulliver, "is good enough for me! I'm goin' to git geared for war an' find that Osceola critter!" The last was punctuated by the slamming of the screen door.

Long strides took Gulliver through the rambling, one-story house to his own room on the side. He jerked a duffel bag from under the bed, loosened the top and up-ended it, spilling the contents to the floor. There was no time, now, to pack all the provisions they had bought. Tom had to be found, and quickly! Gulliver snatched up his gun belt, filled with .45-caliber cartridges, and buckled it on his hips. He pulled his six-shooter out of a woolen sock, flipped open the cylinder, thumbed it full of cartridges and dropped it into the holster. Squatting, he pawed through the pile of spare clothing until he found a hunting knife in a leather sheath. He tucked the knife into his high-top boot and tossed the sheath aside.

"Lemme meet up with that towhead!" he rumbled. "By thunderation I'll play cat's cradle with his neck, an' when I'm done, I'll use him to trim a tree." His voice exploded. "Yo', Whiz! I'm settin' out right now. If yo' aim to travel with me, get yo' gear together an' pile into the jeep. We're gittin' gittin'!"

The big fellow stamped through the house, got into the jeep and kicked the starter.

Whiz came from the house, running. "Hold on!" he yelled. "We're going with you! But we're not ready yet. What good will it do Tom if we go off half-cocked?"

"Git aboard! I got no time to waste!"

Captain Laraby and Broderick followed the reporter, scrambling into the rear of the jeep while Whiz leaped into the front seat beside Gulliver.

"Hang on!"

The driver's warning was well warranted. The jeep started out as if shot from a catapult—and then went faster.

Tom Quest opened his eyes slowly and found himself lying on his back in quarters that had a peculiar familiarity. His head ached and his brain was thick with confusion. He remembered the ceiling and the shelf beneath it. It was the cabin in the *Smackover* X—the small cabin in the stern. But he had left that cabin. He and Gulliver had left it at daybreak—or had that been

part of a dream? He remembered talking to his father—sitting with Broderick and Laraby and the others and hearing about the Everglades. Had all that been a dream? Hardly. But if not, what was he doing in this cabin? He had gone to bed at home—and now— He tried to raise his hands and met resistance, and then it dawned on him that he was tied. Recollections flashed through his brain. He remembered the man who had come in the night with a towel saturated with chloroform. A big man—Kurt Dorgan!

Tom felt hot and sticky. His pajamas were moist with sweat. It was stuffy in the cabin. He heard the engines purring smoothly and realized that the *Smackover* was underway.

"Awake, eh?"

It was a familiar voice with a salty twang. Tom turned his head. Captain Popple sat on the opposite bunk with his hands behind his back. The little skipper's nattiness was gone, and in its place Tom saw dishevelment. His bald head was shiny with perspiration. His eyes were dark with fatigue. There was a stubble of white beard on his lean chin, and one side of his face was swollen. The blue denim shirt was moist and clung to his body so his ribs showed prominently. He looked smaller than ever.

"I," said the captain, "been waitin' fer you to open your eyes."

Tom tried to sit up, only to learn that he had been tied to the bunk.

"No use you tryin' to git up. Dorgan tied you down complete to stop your threshin' around."

"How long have I been here?" Tom asked.

"Couple o' hours. Me, I been here since yestidday mornin'."

"Are you tied?"

"Feet together an' hands behind my back. Looks like we're both in the same boat, an' you can say that double."

"But why?" asked Tom. "What's this all about? Who's running this ship, and where are we going?"

"Avast there, son! Take it easy. One thing to a time. Dorgan came aboard yestidday mornin' while I was workin' my way through the mess that your friend Gulliver left in the galley. Dad-rat that man! He'd hoodoo any ship!"

In spite of the situation, Tom smiled at the peppery little man and admired his spunk. "Then what happened?" he asked.

"Dorgan started askin' me questions about you—slapped me around 'til I answered up, then he tied me. I was gagged fer a time while he went ashore to stock up."

"Stock up?" Tom repeated questioningly.

"Yep. After he had tied my hands, he got to pokin'

around an' found a pad on that shelf over your bunk. There was a picture of a cypress stump in it—at least that's what Dorgan called it."

"Cypress stump," murmured Tom.

"He asked who drew it. I told him you did. Leastwise, I told him you'd slept in that bunk. When he heard that, he got gosh-awful excited. That's when he decided to keep me prisoner—aboard my own ship. He marked time 'til last night, then he went away, after gaggin' me again. When he came back a little while later, he had you with him.

"That's the story, Tom. It don't make no sense to me, but, by ginger, someone's goin' to pay fer all my misery, yes siree!"

"At any rate," Tom said, "you're not licked."

"Not by a jugful I ain't!"

The cruiser's engines slowed and then went silent. A moment later the cabin door swung open to admit Kurt Dorgan. He saw that Tom Quest was awake.

"I hope," he said, "you're not too uncomfortable."

"Do you think you'll get away with this?" demanded Tom.

The blond giant nodded. "I know I will. Do you know where we're going?"

Tom's level eyes met Dorgan's. "How do you expect me to know?"

"I'll tell you. We're going to the cypress stump!"

CHAPTER 14

Tom Talks Back

THE *Smackover X* rose and fell gently a few miles offshore. For a time after Kurt Dorgan's announcement there was no sound in the small cabin abaft the beam.

From his horizontal position, Tom Quest studied the big man and saw that he was well armed. In addition to a heavy gun nestling in a holster on his belt, he held an open clasp knife in one hand. "I suppose," said Tom, "you're the one who chloroformed me last night."

Dorgan nodded. "It wasn't exactly chloroform. It was a new anesthetic that smells about the same. You'll be dizzy for a time, but it'll soon wear off."

Tom didn't feel particularly dizzy. A little weak, perhaps, but he was in full possession of his faculties. "You

talk as if I could get up and walk whenever I wanted to."

"While you were under the anesthetic, you were kicking and throwing your arms around like a pin wheel gone wild. That's why I tied you. Now that you're awake, I'll cut those ropes, but if you try any fast moves—" He tapped the gun significantly.

Dorgan edged his knife between the rope and the blanket covering Tom Quest's chest, then issued another warning. "Remember what I said. Don't try any tricks when I cut you free."

Captain Popple exhaled a disgusted "Humph!" His voice dripped sarcasm. "Maybe you better leave him tied. He weighs almost half as much as you do, an' what's more, you've got only one gun an' a knife to defend yerself against his fists!"

Dorgan paid no attention to the old man's caustic remark. He cut the cords of half-inch hemp, then stepped back against the bulkhead. There was cruel amusement in his eyes as he watched the boy's tortured efforts to slide his feet to the floor and struggle to a sitting position.

While lying quietly on his back, Tom had not been particularly aware of the cramped and numbed condition of his muscles, nor of the aftereffects of the anesthetic. But when he moved, he felt a thousand needles stabbing every nerve and fiber. Giddiness assailed him when he raised his head. Sheer will power

kept him from sinking back into unconsciousness while he fought a sudden wave of nausea. His senses were doing strange things. He could hear his own pulse throbbing against a high-pitched whistling sound while a mist seemed to gather before his eyes. Captain Popple, Dorgan, a table and the lamp it held became vague shapes without sharp definition. He felt as if he were floating through gray space that had no measurement of time or distance.

Presently the mist began to clear; the sounds in his brain subsided and he became more aware of reality. He found himself sitting on the edge of the bunk with his bare feet on the carpeted floor. He rubbed his cramped muscles slowly until Dorgan spoke.

"Your clothes are at the foot of the bunk. Put them on." The big man's manner was like that of an overbearing war lord.

Dorgan's voice droned on while Tom slipped out of his pajamas. "I went to a lot of trouble to lug your clothes aboard. I didn't have to do that, and I didn't have to untie you. I could've kept you in ropes. I'm showing you a lot of consideration, and I hope you'll appreciate it more than he did." He inclined his head toward Captain Popple.

"Consideration!" echoed the spunky skipper. "You *considerationed me* by battin' me from bow to stern, then ropin' me." The little fellow looked toward Tom

and finished his speech with a touch of pride. "He tied me up in self-defense."

Kurt Dorgan spoke as if there had been no interruption. "I'm not a hard man. You meet me halfway and don't make trouble, and we'll get along all right."

The last effects of the anesthetic wore off while Tom was dressing. He tied the last knot in his boots before he spoke.

"Where," he asked, "are we going?"

"I told you."

"You said we were going to the cypress stump."

"That's right. That's exactly where we're going."

"That doesn't mean anything to me."

Dorgan grinned crookedly. "Who're you trying to fool?"

"I'm not trying to fool anyone. I don't know anything about the cypress stump."

Dorgan raised his arm. "I suppose you don't know anything about this, either," he said, pointing to the tattooed tree.

"I've seen another mark just like it."

"And you'll see more."

"I guess it's the trade-mark—or the identification of your gang."

"So," exclaimed Dorgan in the manner of a trial attorney pouncing on a sworn witness who has been caught in a lie, "you know about our gang!"

"That shouldn't be a surprise. You knew that Captain Laraby had talked to Broderick."

"Captain Laraby knew that the tattoo was a mark of identification," Dorgan paused, then finished pointedly, "but he didn't know about the *cypress stump!* Now," he stabbed a finger toward Tom, "tell me where you learned about it!"

"I—" Tom was cut off sharply.

"Don't try to tell me you don't know about it because I know different. I've got proof you know about the cypress stump. I found a drawing of it on the pad over that bunk and another drawing in your shirt pocket, so don't try a lie!"

"I didn't intend to lie," Tom said angrily. "The picture you found was a copy of something Musco scratched inside the air lock on the *New Granada!*"

Dorgan's eyes widened.

"You locked the Seminole in that vault, and you tried to kill Jim Broderick and Captain Laraby. Your name is Kurt Dorgan and my friends know all about you. They'll find you and they'll find me!" Tom was on his feet. "What's more, they'll find the rest of your gang and the stolen platinum!"

Tom's anger had been simmering under control for a long time, but the pressure had been building until it could be held in check no longer. Fueled by the cruel murder of the Seminole, the cunningly devised deaths

that had been planned for Laraby and Broderick and the way Captain Popple had been treated, the boy's rage finally exploded. He spoke without regard for consequences.

"You'll get all that's coming to you, and so will Koerner and Gillig and everyone else in your gang! You're a big man here with a knife and a gun! You're not afraid to slap Captain Popple around! You're brave enough to go to work on me! But you wait until you're up against a man your own size! You just wait 'til you meet Gulliver!"

"Sit down!" cried Dorgan.

Tom paid no attention to the command. "You can't get away! The Everglades aren't big enough to hide you!"

Dorgan stepped forward, shoving Tom against the bunk, his voice trembling with fury. "I said sit down! You've had your say, now I'll have mine! I told you we were going to the cypress stump, and that stands. I'm taking you along as hostage. If your friends get close, they'll soon learn that your life depends on our escape!"

Tom had fallen to his bunk. He didn't try to rise, but his eyes were filled with contempt as he looked at the bloodshot ones of the blond man.

"I was prepared to make things easy for you, but you didn't appreciate it! Now you'll be tied!"

Tom was completely helpless in the steel grip of Dor-

gan's sweaty hands. He was thrown over on his face, and his arms were jerked behind his back and crossed at the wrists. Using a length of the hemp rope, Dorgan did an efficient job of tying. He slammed the door as he left the cabin. A moment later, the cruiser's engines turned and the *Smackover X* purred on her way.

Tom could have kicked himself for giving way to his emotions. He was on the bunk tied hand and foot when he might just as well have been free to move about the cruiser with at least a little hope of making an escape, or finding some means of outwitting his captor. Yet he felt strangely relieved.

"You can swab me like I was a deck!"

Tom looked up.

"I just got it put together," Captain Popple went on. "It took a spell, but I got 'er worked out at last. When you an' your friends went out with me last night, you were lookin' fer crooks on the *New Granada*."

"That's right, Captain Popple. I'm sorry you had to get involved."

"It wasn't your fault, Tom. I'm the one should be apologizin' fer tellin' your name an' where you lived. If I'd known what that big crook was up to, he could've hung me from the mast before I'd have talked. What's all the talk about a cypress stump?"

Tom shook his head slowly. "I wish I knew."

CHAPTER 15

Gulliver Sets the Pace

GULLIVER went first, breaking a path through the saw grass and carrying a pack that would have staggered any ordinary man.

True to his theory that a straight line was the shortest distance between two points, he had taken a compass bearing at the end of the highway where he had left the jeep. His annoyance at finding beeline travel impossible in the Everglades increased with every detour. This, combined with the black rage brought about by Tom Quest's capture, made Gulliver a man to leave alone.

Whiz Walton followed in the big man's tracks. Captain Laraby was next and Broderick brought up the rear.

Walking, at the outset, had been difficult. Mists of early morning had fled before the sun to reveal tangled draperies of foliage and vegetation that came from a most prolific combination of soil and moisture.

Gulliver carried a machete with which he slashed through tangled underbrush. His holster slapped at his thigh with every stride. Jim Broderick was the only other member of the expedition who was armed. There had been no time in the emergency of Tom's abduction to secure additional equipment.

As the sun rose higher, the humidity weighed down like a heavy shroud. A sticky and oppressive heat stewed rivulets of sweat that soaked the clothing and attracted swarms of buzzing insects. Clouds of midges and mosquitoes rose as Gulliver parted grass taller than his head and from time to time a sudden turmoil shook the air when birds fled before the intruders.

Gulliver carried a map on which Hamilton Quest had indicated areas of quicksand around which wide detours had to be made. It was then that Gulliver's complaints were loudest. To hear him, one would think the quicksand had been placed there for the specific purpose of interfering with his line of march.

He set a pace that had the others panting. "I aim to

git across this hunk o' mess as fast as possible," he growled over his shoulder when Captain Laraby asked him to slow down. "Yo' can stay with me or fall back an' set yo' own pace!"

"Laraby, you'd better save your breath for hiking," advised Whiz Walton.

"Bu—but," gasped the captain, "I—I'm almost ready to drop."

"You're not the only one," the columnist replied.

"H-how long can he maintain a pace like this?"

Whiz grinned wryly. "You'd be surprised," he said, remembering the way Gulliver had forged through the jungles of Ecuador and Peru. "And if you feel like dropping out of line, just stop and consider the outlook of finding your way out of here alone."

Laraby shuddered, clamped his mouth and said no more.

A crocodile slithered off a log and submerged itself in milky-looking water. A moment later Gulliver's hand dropped to his side and came up holding his gun. There was a sharp crack. The gun was back in leather and Gulliver hadn't broken his stride.

Each of the three who followed stepped over a cottonmouth that had been curled like a sentinel in Gulliver's path. The moccasin's head had been expertly shot away. Previous experiences had inured Whiz Walton to unexpected acts like this, but Laraby was speechless.

He could only stare, first at the snake and then at Gulliver's broad back.

When he found his voice he turned and spoke to Broderick. "D-did you see that?" he faltered.

The detective nodded grimly. "I'd hate to argue the right of way with Gulliver," he said.

The morning was an endless alternation of jungle, where dense growth was tight on all sides, and swamp, where ankle-deep mud sucked at the boots with every stride.

There were groves where cypress trees spired upward and open stretches where the grass grew over six feet tall above the swampy ground and the reptiles that lived there. In addition to the deadly cottonmouths, there were diamondback rattlers. Spoonbills, black-necked stilts, owls, herons and other birds with outlandish plumage rose screaming in fear as Gulliver advanced.

There were places where roots and tufts of grass were the only steppingstones through quagmire that concealed all manner of crawling things.

The sun was high when Gulliver paused on a knoll of loamy earth beneath a great, gnarled cypress that was white with age and hoary with moss. He untied the bandanna from around his neck, used it to mop his dripping face and wrung it out while he waited for the others to catch up.

Whiz Walton's face was red with a fresh case of sun-

burn and swollen in several places from mosquito bites.

"Yo', Whiz," Gulliver said, "look like the frazzled end of a misspent life. I reckon yo're a-gittin' soft."

"It's rather warm," said the reporter satirically, by way of explanation.

"Hotter'n election day in a hornet's nest," Gulliver agreed. He retied his handkerchief. "I'm sweated down like a tallow candle." To Laraby he said, "How are yo' makin' out?"

"I—I—" gasped the seaman, "I've got to sit down." He sank to the ground at the base of the tree.

"Humph!" muttered Gulliver. "A kitten is robust alongside o' him! How're yo' doin', Broderick?"

The detective grinned gamely. "We must have covered quite a distance."

"We ain't," snapped Gulliver. "With all the fiddle-faddlin' back'n forth to dodge around this an' that, we ain't gone but a third o' the way to Osceola's village. We'll have to travel fast this afternoon to git there by nightfall."

Laraby closed his eyes and mouthed a silent prayer for strength and sustenance.

Whiz Walton, not to be outdone by Gulliver, said, "I wondered why you were saving yourself."

Gulliver lowered his pack, took out his canteen and unscrewed the cap for the first time since setting out from Homestead. "Yo' hombres," he observed, "have

been guzzlin' pretty frequent. Yo'll be smart to be more savin' o' the drinkin' water."

"To hear you talk," Broderick said, "you'd think there was a shortage of water in this swamp, and I can vouch for the fact that there isn't. I'm soaked to the hips."

"Just yo' try drinkin' it," Gulliver said calmly as he lowered his canteen and wiped his mouth. "Yo'll find it takes considerable chewin'."

"Did you bring anything to eat?" asked Whiz.

"For what? This ain't no picnic! Yo've got to stop pamperin' yo'self."

"But I thought—" the reporter said hollowly, "I thought you had some food in your pack."

"We'll git food when we git to Osceola's place. The sooner we git there the sooner we eat."

Whiz sighed resignedly and took a notch in his belt. "How long are we going to rest here?"

The big leader shouldered his pack. "Rest?" he said. "We just did. Now we got to git gittin'."

Travel through the afternoon was a repetition of the morning with stretches of comparatively easy going, and places that were practically impenetrable.

Gulliver seemed to have learned the tricks of movement in that kind of country, and covered the ground with less expenditure of effort than the others. He pushed on with a single purpose—the rescue of Tom Quest at the earliest possible moment.

CHAPTER 16

A Ray of Hope

WHATEVER might be said against Kurt Dorgan, Captain Popple had to admit that he knew the coast of southern Florida as well as the waters off that coast. Since the start of the trip, the small man had been watching through a porthole and pointing out landmarks to Tom Quest. Both he and Tom had been kept tightly bound with their arms behind their backs.

Kurt Dorgan maintained a steady speed of better than fifteen knots as he threaded among the keys and around the shoals with skill that brought mutters of grudging admiration from Captain Popple. The cruiser cut through Barnes Sound and past Key Largo into Blackwater Sound where the bow turned toward the star-

board, following the southern curve of Florida. Though generally westward, the course was marked by many turns and windings as the helmsman hugged the swampy coast line within the limits of safety.

From his side of the cabin, Tom Quest saw mangrove swamps and said, "Where are we now?"

"Just passin' Eagle Key," replied the captain promptly. He looked at the brass clock on the bulkhead next to the cabin door. The hands, one on top of the other, pointed up. "High noon," he said. "By gobs, we sure have made good time!"

It was then that the cruiser slowed. The engines stopped, and presently a small electric motor hummed.

"Droppin' the anchor," observed Popple.

"I wonder if this is as far as we go."

"Your guess is as good as mine, Tom."

Tom studied the shore line. "If the hide-out of the gang is anywhere near here," he said, "Jim Broderick is away off the beam. He thought it was near Whitewater Bay."

"No matter where the place is or what happens to us," the skinny captain said, "I sure could meet things better if I had some food."

"I'm sort of empty myself," admitted Tom. "I didn't have any breakfast. I hope Dorgan hasn't forgotten us."

As if in answer to Tom's comment, the door swung open and Dorgan entered carrying a tray that held a

bottle of milk, a loaf of bread in the wax wrapper, and an assortment of sliced cold meats.

"Doggone," said Captain Popple, "I'm sure glad to see you don't aim to starve us."

Dorgan kicked the door closed and deposited the tray on a small table. "You'll have to eat fast," he said, "and one at a time. You're first."

He grabbed Captain Popple, turning him roughly, so he could reach the ropes that held the skinny wrists together behind the back. He untied the knot, then stepped back with his thumb hooked to his gun belt and his fingers dangling close to the handle of his pistol.

"Eat fast," he repeated. "We're not stopping long. As soon as you're through, I'll give the boy a chance to eat."

Captain Popple extended his paper-white hands and looked at them as if they were something detached. He tapped the finger tips experimentally on the edge of the bunk, then began a clumsy effort to restore the circulation. He saw Tom watching sympathetically.

"I can get 'em workin' in a couple o' minutes," he said gamely. "I'm gettin' the hang of it now. I went through this three times yestidday, but this is the first time today an' it's a mite worse'n usual. Been tied up longer'n before."

"Hurry up," barked Dorgan. "If you stall too long, your friend won't have a chance to eat!"

Captain Popple turned to the food, handling it as if with boxing gloves. He scorned the bread but stuffed his mouth with slices of ham and sausage which he gulped down half chewed. He gripped the bottle in both hands, took a swallow of milk and set it down. "I'm through," he said.

"You can't be through," argued Tom. "Go ahead and eat as much as you can hold. I don't mind waiting."

"He does," replied the captain, pointing to Dorgan. "He minds waitin', an' he's just ornery enough to let you watch me eat, then shove on without givin' you a chance at the grub." He held his hands behind his back and turned so they were convenient to Dorgan. "Go ahead," he invited. "Put that rope back on."

Tom Quest had spent much of his time trying to hit on some way to get rid of the ropes that held him. He had struggled until his wrists were chafed, but the rope had neither stretched nor loosened.

If he could just get out of those ropes and have the split seconds that were needed for a dash and a dive over the rail, he could swim ashore without difficulty. The dangers of the swim and the subsequent perils of the swampland never entered his considerations.

And now his hands were to be free so he might eat.

His mind worked at a frantic pace in an effort to decide how to turn the fleeting opportunity to good advantage.

Then Dorgan spoke. "If you want your hands untied, turn around so I can reach 'em."

Tom turned facing away from Dorgan. He felt the heavy fingers fumbling at his wrists, then heard a low chuckle.

"Your wrists are raw. You must have been fighting this rope. I guess you've learned by now that I tie knots that stay, and use rope that can't be stretched." After a brief pause Dorgan continued. "All right, you're free. Start eating."

Tom turned slowly and rubbed his hands together as Captain Popple had done.

Dorgan eyed the clock. "Time's running out," he said. "If you stall much longer, you'll be tied up again without eating."

"All right," replied Tom. "I'll eat."

He ate slowly while his mind kept working at top speed. He gauged the distance between himself and Dorgan with an idea of risking everything in a desperate gamble that a sudden attack might succeed. Would a straight-arm to Dorgan's stomach be effective? He doubted it. The big man was as hard as rock. Would a sudden leap give Tom possession of the pistol? He rejected that as another hopeless proposition.

"Hurry up!"

Tom nodded. He picked up the milk bottle and as he drank and swallowed slowly, he considered throwing

the bottle at his captor, but Dorgan could easily dodge it. That idea was no good. An attempted escape that failed would make the situation worse than ever. Tom knew he would have but one opportunity, if any. He must bide his time and wait until there was at least a one-in-a-thousand chance of success.

"Your time is up! Maybe you haven't eaten all you can hold, but you've had all you're going to get!"

Tom nodded.

"Stand up," demanded Dorgan. "Stand up and give me your hands."

As Tom rose, something sparked in his brain. It was only the faintest glimmering of an idea, and it came to him when Dorgan said, "*Give me your hands.*"

The spark, once born, grew with incredible speed until it was a brilliant light of hope. Like steppingstones, Tom saw each detail of a plan of escape. It was a sublimely simple plan, and it all hinged on the success of the next few seconds. Whether or not his plan could be put into effect depended on Tom's ability to make a simple gesture in a manner so normal and natural that Dorgan would fall into step. Dorgan had said "*Give me your hands,*" and Tom meekly obeyed. He extended his hands in front of him and crossed the wrists.

Dorgan passed the rope around the wrists and tied hard knots with no suspicion that exultation surged through every fiber of Tom's being.

"I guess that'll hold you," Dorgan said as he tested the rope, and found it firm.

Tom didn't dare let Dorgan see his eyes. He kept them downcast so they would not betray his triumph.

Kurt Dorgan took the tray with him when he left the cabin. Not until then did Tom Quest breathe normally. He grinned widely at Captain Popple.

"Sakes alive," the old man said, "if I didn't know different, I'd say you was feelin' downright smart."

Tom said, "I am!"

"How's that?" The captain cocked his head as if he hadn't heard correctly.

"Look at my hands," said Tom.

"What about 'em?"

"They're not behind my back!"

"That don't say they ain't tied."

"But they're out in front, and I can move my fingers." Tom wiggled his fingers to prove the statement. "Just wait 'til the engine starts. I think we can get out of this."

The conviction in Tom's voice brought hope to the old man's face, but it was hope tinged with uncertainty.

"You foolin'?" he asked.

"Not by a jugful!" Tom replied, grinning.

Popple's uncertainty was gone. "By gobs!" he said. "I believe you!"

For the next few minutes the old man squirmed and fidgeted as if he itched all over. He watched Tom eye-

ing the wall clock with its eight-inch dial, then transferred his attention to the clock. The sweeping second hand made a complete circle and half of another.

A motor hummed as the anchor was brought up and then the engine started with a rumble that settled to a smooth purr as the cruiser began to move.

Captain Popple could stand the suspense no longer. "We're movin'," he said. "The engine's turnin'. You can't hold out on me no longer! What's the plan fer gettin' us shut of this? Why'd we have to wait fer the engine to get goin'?"

"I've got to make a little noise, and I didn't want Dorgan to hear it."

"He's in the wheelhouse in the bow. With our door closed, you could make considerable noise without him hearin'."

"I won't have to make much."

Looking about the cabin, Tom spotted a heavy paperweight on a small writing table in the corner. Though his ankles were tied, he managed to sidle close enough to reach the chunky bit of metal, then reversed his course and made his slow way to the bulkhead.

He stopped at the clock and took a firm grip on the paperweight, then raised both hands, and tapped the round glass, lightly at first, then harder until it broke and fell in pieces to the floor. He dropped beside the jagged segments, studied them a moment and chose one

that suited his purpose. He picked it up and made his way to the bunk where Popple sat wide-eyed with bewilderment.

"A hunk o' busted glass! What in blazes are you goin' to do with that?"

"It looks like glass but actually it's a knife," Tom replied.

"A knife?"

"The edge is sharp enough to cut a rope, if I work on it a little."

"By gobs," breathed the captain, comprehending Tom's plan. Then in a softer voice, almost a whisper of admiration, he repeated himself. "By—gobs!"

"Turn around. Turn your back to me so I can get at the rope."

The old man fairly bounced in his eagerness to cooperate.

Tom's hands were at right angles to each other, and it was awkward to handle the glass knife. He had to move both hands back and forth in perfect co-ordination to saw at the rope. It was new rope, and half an inch in thickness, but Tom worked at it persistently. He paused once and wiggled his fingers to relieve the cramp that came from gripping the bit of glass. He renewed the attack, cutting through strand after strand.

"Almost through," he grunted. "Try pulling your hands apart."

Captain Popple took a deep breath. His narrow shoulders wriggled as his arms strained at the cord. There was a slight snapping sound, and he was free.

He got his fingers working, then went at the line that held Tom's hands together. The old man knew his knots and after a couple of minutes' work Tom was free. He untied the knot holding his ankles together while the captain did the same.

"Now," said the little skipper, "let's go after that big bilge rat!"

"Not so fast, Captain Popple," replied Tom. "He has a gun and he won't hesitate to use it. We've got to play it safe and we've got to wait until we're in the right place. We don't want to spoil everything. You just sit down on your bunk and watch our course. Keep me posted and I'll tell you when it's time to act."

Grinning widely, Captain Popple gave a mock salute. "Aye, aye, sir! From now on, you give the orders, an' I'll take 'em. It's Cap'n Quest—that's you. Me—I'm plain Bowline Popple, mate o' the *Smackover* X, an' proud to serve under you!"

CHAPTER 17

Break for Freedom

"When do we go after that big blubber-faced crook?" demanded Captain Popple.

Tom Quest sat on the bunk beside the bald-headed little man and watched the shore slipping past. "Not just yet," he said.

"That's the fourth time you said the same."

"It's the fourth time you've asked the same question," Tom replied. "And all within five minutes."

The captain squirmed nervously. "I'm tired o' doin' nothin'. I want some action."

"You'll have plenty of action in a little while."

"Good. That's first-rate. Tell me about it, Tom." Popple grinned. "Tell me how we're goin' to reef Dor-

gan's sails. Chart the course fer me. Tell me what your plan is."

"I will if you'll sit still."

"I'm still. Let 'er rip."

"We can't leave the ship until we see a good place to go ashore."

"Leave the ship?" echoed the small man. "What do you mean by that?"

"Just what I said. We've got to sneak up on deck, go over the rail and swim to shore. We'll—"

"Avast!" cut in the skipper. "You mean to say we're sneakin' off this craft an' leavin' Dorgan in command?"

"That's right."

"That ain't right. It's all wrong! This here is *my* cruiser. Why should I leave 'er? We got to capture that lubber, put him in irons an' throw him into the brig!"

Tom grinned at the old man's fire. "Where," he asked, "is the brig?"

"We got no brig, but that's all right. At sea the captain's in full charge. I'll find the lubber guilty o' mutiny or somethin' an'—"

"Now hold on. I know how you feel about leaving the *Smackover*, but it's the only thing we can do. Dorgan could take both of us on with one hand. We wouldn't have a chance against him, even if he weren't armed. He's already killed one man and tried to kill

two others. If we tackle him and lose, there's no telling what might happen."

"Doggone it, Tom. I'm let down. I figured on seein' Dorgan in ropes."

"He'll be in ropes. He'll be in handcuffs if we can get away from here and get some help."

Captain Popple sighed deeply, then said, "All right, Tom. Go ahead with your plan. But how soon can we make the break fer shore?"

Tom had a mental picture of the chart his father had made. He remembered a certain mangrove-covered shore of a small bay that was almost due south of Osceola's village. He referred to a small map he had found in the desk. "See this cove?"

"Yep."

"Will you recognize it when we get there?"

"Sure thing."

"Let me know. That's where we make our break."

"But there's nothin' there. Nothin' but a lot o' swamp an' mangrove trees. It's bad country. No one goes there."

"It's bad shore all along here. As soon as we get away from Dorgan, we'll head north."

"*Inland?*" demanded the captain incredulously.

"Yes."

"But that swamp—"

"I think we can get through it. When Dad was briefing us on the territory around Osceola's camp I took note especially of the trails leading to it. We'll head north to an Indian village where I'm sure we'll find friends."

"Tom, you do beat all!"

"It will be better than trying to find some way back to Miami. There are a lot of men in Dorgan's gang, and they might recapture us if we stay near the coast."

"How'd you say we get ashore?"

"Go over the rail and swim for it."

"There's some bad fish in these waters. I reckon you know that."

"That's a chance we'll have to take."

"That ain't the only chance."

"No?"

Captain Popple shook his bald head. "Nope," he said. "Y'see, Tom, I can't swim."

For a moment the boy saw all his plans crashing like a house of cards.

"Hold on," the captain continued. "I got an idea!" He dropped to the floor and reached beneath the bunk. "I got a couple o' life jackets here somewheres," he grunted. "Here we are." He held up a standard life preserver. "I'll put this thing on. It'll keep me afloat an' I'll sunfish my way to shore somehow."

"I guess," Tom said dubiously, "I can tow you."

"But that'll slow you down."

"That's all right."

Captain Popple grew very serious. "Son," he said, "maybe it'd be better if you went alone. I'll stay aboard my ship an' wait 'til you find help an' come to deal with Dorgan."

"Not a chance," returned Tom quickly. "We're going to stick together. I'll get you ashore."

"Hey, Tom!" The exclamation came sharply. "Look off yonder. There's the cove you wanted."

It seemed a long way across the sparkling water to the row of gently waving mangrove trees. It would be a long swim and, towing Captain Popple, a slow one. If Dorgan happened to see the two heads in the water, he could turn the cruiser and overtake the swimmers long before they reached the shore. Tom tried to hide his concern from the old man.

"Good," he said heartily. "As Gulliver would put it, 'Let's git gittin'.' "

"Never you mind how Gulliver would put it," retorted Captain Popple. "Let's just clear out!"

Tom had already thought out each detail of the escape and was prepared to act.

The swim would be longer than he had calculated, and he would have to make it fully clothed. Looking down at the heavy boots he was wearing, he made a quick decision. A moment later he was barefooted and

the boots were tied together around his neck. He had previously considered the advisability of stripping down, but had rejected this because the boots and clothing would be needed when he reached the shore. A barefoot hike through the swampland was far less to be desired than the swim with boots around his neck. His pockets were empty. All the articles he had planned to bring were in a rucksack that Dorgan had left in the bedroom back at the cottage.

Captain Popple had a supply of matches in a waterproof container as well as a stout jackknife and a compass, and the old man wore a wrist watch.

A search of the desk and a couple of lockers provided a few odds and ends that might come in handy. Tom stowed these beneath his shirt, then turned to Captain Popple and said, "Follow me."

He opened the door cautiously an inch at a time and tiptoed through the galley. There was little likelihood of discovery below deck. The great risk came as the two went through the hatch within plain view of the wheelhouse.

Tom saw Kurt Dorgan smoking a cigarette at the helm, but Dorgan's back was turned. Tom breathed, "This is it!" Together they knelt down and swung their feet overboard. They clung to the mahogany gunwale for a moment and then pushed themselves free from the speeding boat.

Tom made a grab for Captain Popple, who was wrapped in the life preserver, and immediately began kicking violently to keep clear of the propeller. As soon as this danger was passed, he moved back, treading water and watched Captain Popple floating high.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Sure I'm all right. Looks like we got clear o' that pirate! Now all we got to do is get to shore!"

The mangroves looked farther away than ever. Tom moved close and said, "Put your hands on my shoulders."

"Are you goin' to swim feet first?"

"No." Tom grinned. "Instead of towing you, I'll push you. Just lie back and let your feet come up. Hang on to my shoulders and I'll swim breast stroke."

After the first few minutes, Captain Popple gained confidence in the peculiar method of locomotion. Then he tried to turn his head.

"Never mind looking," Tom told him. "You'll know when we get to shore."

The boy's legs were strong and his froglike kick was powerful, but the shore was far away. Moreover the breast stroke was a tiring one. He swam, it seemed, for ages before he was discernibly nearer to land.

His arms ached but he forged on, stroke by stroke, kick by kick. He was determined to be as game as Captain Popple and wondered if he would have had the

courage to leap into the ocean with no swimming ability as the little man had done. He was proud of the implicit faith that had been placed in him by the other. Determination to justify that faith transcended exhaustion.

Finally he could see the bottom, and a moment later, touch it.

"That," he gasped, "that does it! Now you can let go!"

Captain Popple released his grip and stood in shallow water. That was more than Tom could do. His tired legs refused to support his weight. He left the water on hands and knees, then sat for a time and rubbed his tortured muscles. But he grinned. "For a while there," he said when he had recovered his breath, "I thought we might not make it."

"You did?" demanded Captain Popple.

Tom nodded.

"How's that?" queried the old man. "You figured man-eatin' fish might sight us?"

Tom shook his head. "No, I didn't even think about that. I thought I'd give out."

"Stuff an' nonsense!" Captain Popple snorted. "I never had no doubts about you stickin'. You ain't the kind o' lad that founders."

The two rested until the sun had dried their clothes, which took less than twenty minutes. Tom picked up the map that had been spread to dry, studied it and made a tiny pencil dot at the point of the cove where he

had landed, then drew a line to Osceola's village as he had remembered it on his father's big chart. He folded the map and put it in his pocket, pointed north and said, "That's where we're going."

Captain Popple glanced at the sun. "How long'll it take us to get there?"

"I don't know."

"Maybe we'll be overtook by darkness."

"Maybe," agreed Tom. "We won't try to travel in the dark. If we can't make Osceola's place by daylight, we'll camp for the night. I hope we don't have to, though. This country gives me the willies."

The old man saluted and grinned. "Aye, aye, sir. Lead on, Cap'n Tom."

CHAPTER 18

The Seminole Village

GULLIVER became more grim as the afternoon advanced. Lake Okeechobee and a copious rainfall kept the southern part of Florida well supplied with water. The swamp had the appearance of a lake enclosing thousands of islets covered with dense thickets.

Since noon there had been several narrow escapes from tragic accidents. At one time, Gulliver, in his desire to follow a beeline as closely as possible, had stepped into a quicksand bog and had gone down to his knees before the others had pulled him out. Half an hour later, he had refused to go around a large pool but had

changed his mind on learning that the pool was infested with man-eating alligators. After that the big man paid more attention to the maps and supplementary information Hamilton Quest had provided. Quest's studies of the Everglades had been made many years before, but the findings remained accurate.

Whiz Walton had often wondered why the area had never been completely charted. Now he knew. The conditions were such that a thorough survey was virtually impossible. He reflected that he probably could count on the fingers of his two hands the number of people other than Indians who had crossed the swamp without the aid of a Seminole guide.

All four of the men were wet to the hips from wading, and their shirts were soaked with sweat. They were miserably uncomfortable and tortured by the thought that night might overtake them before they reached their destination—Osceola's village. They discussed this possibility during a breathing spell on one of the islets.

"What would we do?" demanded Whiz. "Could we camp in a place like this?"

"We could," Gulliver replied, "but we might have a little argument with some o' the critters that stay hid durin' the day."

"Do you mean Indians?" asked Captain Laraby.

Gulliver shook his head. "Injuns," he said, "are people. I can handle them."

"There are a lot of panthers around here," put in Jim Broderick.

Gulliver snorted. "Panthers, humph!" he said. "They're nothin' but first cousins to wildcats. The Everglades is filled with wildcats too, but I ain't worried about them. We just post a guard an' build a campfire so's we can see eyes shinin' in the dark, then open fire. A bullet will fix the critters if they come coyotin' around. But poison snakes an' alligators—they're different."

Whiz Walton spoke nervously. "Darkness comes quickly around here."

"Yo're right," agreed Gulliver. "When the sun goes down it's light one minute an' dark the next. That's why I ain't thinkin' about nothin' but reachin' Osceola's place."

Captain Laraby was looking in the branches of cypress and palms as if he wondered how many panthers, wildcats and other fierce beasts might be hidden there.

"Have you," asked Jim Broderick, "any idea how much farther it is to the Seminole village?"

Gulliver looked at his chart. "Offhand I'd say she's about half an inch."

"What's that? Did you say half an inch?"

"Yo' heard me. We've come about an inch an' a half so far."

"Oh! A half an inch on the map."

Gulliver nodded. "Accordin' to the scale, half an inch

ain't more'n two or three miles as the crow flies, but the way we have been havin' to checkerboard sideways dodgin' this an' dodgin' that, it might take us five or six hours to git to Osceola. An' we don't have that much daylight."

"The going might improve," suggested Whiz.

Gulliver uttered a short "Maybe." He hitched his pants, "There's only one way to find out. Come on an' follow me."

He stepped from the hummock and splashed through ankle-deep water directly against the blazing ball of sun that soon would be touching the horizon.

The trees became more dense. There were giant palms and willows and the stately cypress, and then there was more saw grass and a lot of mud and tangled, thorny growth that fell before the onslaught of Gulliver's machete. But conditions were better than they had been. No further detours were necessary.

Whiz Walton kept his fingers crossed in the hope that the firmer footing would continue. The saw grass was higher than it had been at any point during the journey. Gulliver pushed through, parting it with his hands and breaking a path for the others to follow.

The saw grass ended abruptly at a large clearing surrounded by giant, moss-draped cypress trees whose branches met overhead.

Gulliver stopped and stared.

Whiz Walton gasped.

Jim Broderick was silent.

Captain Laraby faltered, "Wha—what is it?"

In the center of the clearing a dozen huge logs were arranged like the spokes of a wheel. A fire burned in the hub. Both logs and fire were roofed by a thatch of palmetto leaves supported on long poles.

Around the edge of the clearing there were houses known as *chikees*. Their construction was similar to the roof over the fire, except that the houses had floors raised several feet above the ground.

Gulliver's face relaxed in a wide grin when he realized what he had found. "We made it," he said. "This here is Osceola's village! Now to find out where Dorgan an' his pals are hidin'."

"I hope," said Whiz, "we're not disappointed."

"What do yo' mean?" demanded Gulliver sharply.

"We've taken a lot for granted. We've just assumed that Osceola knows about the hide-out of those pirates."

"These Injuns know everything," retorted Gulliver defiantly.

Whiz said, "Even if we find the hide-out, we have no assurance that Tom was taken there."

Gulliver didn't reply. His face had grown hard as he watched the slow advance of a group of Indians. They were neither friendly nor aggressive. They paused ten

feet away and waited noncommittally for the white men to make the first move.

When Gulliver raised his hand and said, "How," one of the Indians detached himself from the rest, advanced three paces and responded to the salute. His long-sleeved jacket, glowing with all the colors of the rainbow, fell loosely over the waistband of dirty white ducks. A red neckerchief was knotted about his throat. His dark-brown face was topped with long black hair that hung straight on each side of his mouth. He looked unblinkingly at each of the visitors in turn, his black eyes staring like those of a jungle animal.

Gulliver tapped himself on the chest and said, "Me Gulliver."

The Indian duplicated the gesture, and his thick lips moved. "Me Osceola," then his face relaxed with Gulliver's grin.

"Yo're the gent I'm lookin' for! We come a long way to find yo', Osceola. We need yo' help an' we're willin' to pay for it."

Without awaiting a reply, he marched directly to the community kitchen in the center of the clearing, put his pack on the ground, opened it and pulled out an assortment of brightly colored beads, chains, necklaces and lengths of cloth. As he spread the trade goods on the loamy ground the Indians gathered close to watch. An

old squaw left the corn she had been pounding in a mortar that had been hollowed from a section of a cypress log. Other Indians rose from their seats on the fire log, and some came from the *chikees*.

Gulliver finished arranging his display and stepped back proudly. He addressed Osceola. "I hope yo' savvy English," he began.

The chief replied, "Me speak Ing-lis."

"That'll help. Now listen careful, Osceola. I got precious little time an' I got to make the most of it. I don't aim to fiddle-faddle with a lot o' whiffle talk. I—" he was interrupted by a nudge from Whiz Walton.

"Slow down and take it easy, Gulliver. He can't understand that kind of clack."

Gulliver took a deep breath, hitched his belt and started again. "Yo'," he said pointing to Osceola, "savvy a man named Quest?"

For the first time Osceola registered real interest. "Me know," he said. "Him good. Him plenty good." He turned quickly to a woman whose brilliantly colored clothes were heavily loaded with ornaments and voiced a rapid string of syllables from the language of the Creeks.

"Me show," he said to Gulliver as the woman hurried across the clearing to the largest of the houses.

Gulliver went on. "Hamilton Quest," he said, "has

got a son an' we're lookin' for him. We need yo' help in findin' him."

Osceola seemed to understand but before he could reply the squaw returned bearing a slab of cypress wood about ten inches square. It had been split from a log to form a board slightly more than an inch in thickness.

Osceola took the board and turned it over. The surface had been rubbed smooth, then carved with a knife in a pattern that Gulliver recognized. It was a spiral with a smaller spiral in the reverse direction dangling from the bottom.

Osceola beamed when he saw recognition in the big man's face. "You know," he said.

"Yo're doggoned right I know what that is! That's the work o' Hamilton Quest. He musta done that when he was here in the swamps more'n twenty years ago." Gulliver held up his hand so Osceola could see the massive finger ring surmounted by a gold replica of the carving.

"Look at this," he continued. "I reckon that will tell yo' Quest is my friend."

The reaction surprised Gulliver and the others. Osceola barked commands that the Indians scurried to obey. The women stirred up the fire, took down dried meat and pots and pans as well as herbs that had been hanging from the roof over the fireplace. The men picked up

the gifts that Gulliver had spread out on the ground and returned them to the knapsack. It took several minutes for Osceola, in a confusing jumble of English words and Creek expressions, to explain that his and the services of all his people were at Gulliver's disposal in finding the son of Hamilton Quest—that the white men were to be honored by a feast during which plans for the search would be discussed—and, lastly, that the Indians could not accept pay for what they did to help a man who came from Hamilton Quest.

CHAPTER 19

Osceola Lends a Hand

GULLIVER wanted to make the most of his unexpected good luck. He had reached the Seminole village earlier than he had dared to hope and wanted to push the search for Tom Quest in the daylight that remained. He was convinced that Dorgan would take the boy to the hide-out that, according to Jim Broderick, lay in the Whitewater Bay area in southern Monroe county.

The Seminoles knew that swampland the way Whiz Walton knew Times Square. They would surely be acquainted with the outlaw hideaway, and Osceola was eager to help in any way he could. The problem lay in translating the desired objective into words that the

chief could understand. Osceola's knowledge of "Inglis" was limited to a few simple words. Gulliver's vocabulary was salted with many original expressions that defied translation into any language. When he tried to speak without his favorite terms, he found himself practically tongue-tied.

The village was assembled in a circle for the feast. Gulliver sat between Osceola and Whiz Walton. Captain Laraby was on the newshound's right, and next to him sat Broderick.

Gulliver had a look of desperation in his eyes. He took a deep breath, exhaled, then said, "I'll try again. Now try to savvy this, Osceola. The critters we're lookin' for are ornery, double-twisted sidewinders an' they're crooked enough to swaller nails an' spit out corkscrews. We figure they're the ones that are holdin' Tom Quest."

Osceola looked more bewildered than ever.

"What I'm gittin' at is this. The polecats are bedded down in a hide-out near here an' they been there for some time as cozy as a toad under a cabbage leaf."

"Cab-bidge?" repeated Osceola questioningly.

"Forgit that, it don't count. We don't want to go knockin' around these swamps like a blind dog in a meat shop."

"Dog?" repeated Osceola quickly. "Me savvy dog." He looked pleased.

Gulliver waved his big hand. "No, no, forgit dog.

Throw that out! We don't want no dog! We want Tom Quest an' we want to find the platinum-stealin' crooks that got him!"

Osceola looked discouraged and shook his head slowly. "Me no savvy."

A concoction consisting primarily of corn-meal mush called *sofkee* had been served in coconut bowls. The Indians started eating, but Gulliver went on talking.

"What I'm a-tryin' to tell yo', Osceola," he reiterated patiently.

Whiz Walton touched his arm. "You're not getting any place. Let me try to explain it."

"Whiz, yo' keep out o' this. If I can't make Osceola savvy what we're lookin' for, yo' can't do it! Yo' been yowlin' for grub all day. Now yo' got some in front of yo'. Go ahead an' eat 'er." He looked past the reporter and glowered at Broderick and Captain Laraby. "That goes for yo' two as well!" he said. "Eat yo' vittles."

Broderick said, "We tried it. I'm hungry enough to eat a burnt boot, but this stuff—ugh!"

"Never mind how it tastes. Yo' got to eat it. We don't want to offend these Injuns."

Whiz Walton picked up a gob of the mush in a wooden spoon and sampled it. "Wallpaper paste," he groaned.

"Eat 'er," warned Gulliver. "Every smidge! It won't do to insult the Injuns!"

"Mist' Gull-ver." It was Osceola speaking.

Gulliver turned. The chief pointed to Gulliver's untouched bowl of *sofkee*. "You not like?" he said.

"Me? Oh, sure. Sure I like it!" replied the big man quickly.

"You eat."

"Go ahead," Whiz Walton said fiendishly. "Grit your teeth and choke it down. Never mind how it tastes, you've got to eat it. We don't want to offend these Injuns!"

Gulliver glowered at his *sofkee*, then threw back his head and held the bowl over his wide-open mouth. The mass of glutinous stuff dropped into the cavernous opening with a soft *glop*. Gulliver gulped it down with two prodigious swallows. He shuddered.

Osceola said, "You like *sofkee?*"

Gulliver forced his face into a pleased expression and spoke in a tone that gave the chief an entirely mistaken idea of the meaning of the words. "Never in all my born days did I eat anythin' more pulin'." He went on quickly before the happy Indian could suggest a refill. "Now as I was sayin', we got to find Tom Quest, an' to do so we got to find the camp o' the crooks that captured him. We're lookin' for a hide-out—"

He got nowhere.

The rest of the meal was an improvement on the *sof-*

kee. There were wild turkey stew, cowpeas and sweet potatoes. The dessert consisted of small, wild oranges that were sour beyond measure.

When Whiz bit into one his face screwed up and his mouth grew tight from an astringent quality that could be compared to a combination of styptic pencil and sulphuric acid. The reporter's lips felt as if they had been stitched up with a darning needle.

But the oranges appealed to Gulliver. He finished one and said, as he reached for another, "These here things got authority."

The meal ended with Osceola still in the dark in regard to Gulliver's desires. The big man finally surrendered.

"Whiz," he said as he eyed the lowering sun, "when that there sun goes down, it'll git dark so sudden yo'll think someone spilled a bottle of ink. See if yo' can make Osceola savvy the kind o' place we're lookin' for."

Gulliver moved away from the circle weighted down by defeat. He had counted heavily on Osceola's aid and hadn't expected a situation such as this. He held little hope that Whiz Walton would be able to make the chief understand, and without the help of the Indians there was scant likelihood of finding the gang's headquarters.

He sat down on a heavy log, his feet wide apart on the

packed earth. His elbows rested on his knees, and his big hands were cupped beneath his chin. The reporter was no more successful than he had been.

Gulliver gave up trying to follow the stilted dialogue. He thought of Tom Quest as a prisoner of men like Gillig, Koerner and Kurt Dorgan. Broderick had told about their ruthlessness. They would stop at nothing to gain their ends. Suppose they killed Tom. Or worse, suppose they tortured him in the hope of getting information they might think he possessed. Why else had the boy been captured?

Those men were cruel beyond belief. Gulliver thought of the inhuman way poor Musco had been entombed. Musco, who in his dying moments had so bravely tried to leave a clue.

Gulliver's head snapped up. A clue! The cypress stump scratched on the paint inside the air lock! There had to be a reason for it. Musco had been a Seminole. The stump might mean something to Osceola.

Gulliver picked up a stick and broke it to get a sharp end. Using it as a stylus, he scratched a crude resemblance to a cypress tree in the packed-down loam. Then he bellowed, "Osceola! Look here! Yo' see that?"

The Indian nodded.

"It's a cypress tree. Yo' know that, don't yo'? Cypress tree—yo' savvy?"

"Cy-prus tree. Me savvy."

Gulliver pointed again to the ground where he now drew a cypress stump. "Take a look at that. It's the stump o' the tree. Tree cut down, sawed off, nothin' but the stump left. Yo' savvy?"

A light of understanding came into Osceola's face. He nodded vigorously, pointing to the drawing. "That great master of tree; that oldest of all tree. Bottom part stand. Topside gone. Me savvy. You go there?"

"Holy mackerel!" exclaimed Whiz Walton. "I think you've struck pay dirt!"

"That stump," Gulliver exclaimed, "is a landmark, an' Osceola knows where it is! That's what Musco meant! That's what the pore critter was tryin' to tell us. He was givin' us the clue to the hide-out o' that gang!"

"What are you talking about?" demanded Whiz Walton.

"I'll tell yo' the details later. Right now we got to git under way."

Osceola clapped his hands and called, "Timu!"

A strong young Indian stepped forward.

"Timu good guide," the chief explained. "Him show way."

"How far is it?"

Osceola pointed to the sun, now low in the sky, then held his left arm bent at the elbow so the forearm was horizontal across his chest. Above it, he held a circle formed with the thumb and index finger of his right

hand. The circle was in the same relative position to the forearm as the sun was to the horizon.

"Sun here," he said, "you start." He lowered the circle until it touched his arm as the sun in a short time would meet the horizon. "Sun here; you see old cyprus."

"Yo' mean we'll be there by sunset?"

"Sun-set." Osceola nodded. "You there."

"Broderick!" barked Gulliver. "Yo' got a shootin' iron, haven't yo'?"

"Yes."

"But I haven't," put in Captain Laraby.

Whiz Walton said, "Neither have I. When you started out this morning, you didn't give us time to pack anything we needed."

"Me an' Broderick have guns," rumbled Gulliver as he shouldered his pack. "We can unravel all the cartridges that's needed, an' if we run out o' ammunition I still got my machete!"

The blade fairly sizzled as Gulliver swung it to emphasize his words. "When I'm through with the swamp rats that made off with Tom Quest, they'll look like new-sheared sheep!"

CHAPTER 20

The Sun Goes Down

"NORTHWEST CAPE," muttered Kurt Dorgan to himself as the *Smackover X* pushed past a point on Cape Sable. "It will soon be time to cut into the canal."

He had held a steady pace of fifteen knots after giving food to Tom and Captain Popple. Confident that his prisoners could not escape, he had relaxed in daydreams while the cruiser followed the shore line.

After passing Northwest Cape, the course was due north for about fifteen miles which would bring him to the mouth of a creek. The creek had no name. It wasn't shown on small maps, and the large ones marked it with no more than a hairline, but the men who wore the tat-

tooed cypress tree had seen an ambitious engineering project, supervised by Koerner and Gillig, widen and deepen the waterway until it could accommodate boats as large as the *Smackover X*.

It had been a wartime undertaking. The spies had planned to make the canal a secret port of entry into the United States. The war had ended just about the time of its completion. But Koerner and Gillig had simply converted it to their postwar activity of looting sunken vessels.

Dorgan had traversed the canal in his small boat many times to bring in the stolen platinum and incidental loot. He chuckled softly. "Wait 'til Koerner and Gillig see what I've got this time. They'll probably be sore when they find out I didn't get Laraby and Broderick, but they'll get over it when they see this cruiser."

The acquisition of a fast boat, he knew, had been discussed by the ringleaders on a number of occasions. They needed a seaworthy craft in which to carry the platinum to another country where it might be converted into cash. The *New Granada* would never have served this purpose even if Broderick had not put an end to its usefulness by his discovery. The *Smackover X* with favorable weather could go almost anywhere, and with Captain Popple a prisoner, who was there to report the theft or register a complaint?

"And the best part of it," thought Dorgan, "is the

boy." He chuckled again. "I was smart to bring him. His friends won't dare move against us as long as we have him as hostage."

Yes, Koerner and Gillig would be very much pleased. Dorgan glanced at the sun. A great ball of fire, low on the horizon.

"Making good time," he observed. "I'll be in the hide-out by sunset. I wonder what the boy and the old man are thinking of right now?"

Despite all he had gone through, Captain Popple was still able to grin. "I don't know where we're goin'," he said, "but you're chartin' the course, son."

The two had paused on a willow hummock for a breathing spell. Tom glanced at the compass.

"We holdin' the course?"

Tom said, "Yes," and made a dot on his map. "Right now, I think we're here. According to Dad, Osceola's village is just about—here where I've marked it with an X."

The map showed a number of similar dots along the route that had been traversed after leaving the beach.

Captain Popple had refused to abandon his life jacket. He wore it tightly drawn about his skinny chest. "Sure hot," he muttered.

"Why don't you get rid of that life belt?" asked Tom. "You're carrying a lot of extra weight."

"Not by a jugful!" The captain patted the cork jacket affectionately. "These things is all right. I never knowed how good they worked until today."

"You've never worn one before?" asked Tom in surprise.

"Nope. An' man an' boy, I've traveled the sea fer a good many years. I always wondered what it'd be like to go overboard in a floater, but I was always scairt to try 'er. This thing could really keep a man from drownin'." He squinted at the sheet of water ahead. "No tellin' when I'll need it."

Tom assured the old man they would encounter no deep water in the swamp.

"How do you know so much about it?"

"Dad showed me a lot of charts."

"He tell you how to find your way to where we're goin'?"

"Yes. There are Indian trails all through the Everglades."

"We're followin' a trail?"

"Sort of."

"Humph. Some trail! That's all I got to say."

The trail could not be seen, but it had definite existence in Tom Quest's mind. Listening to his father and studying his father's charts and notebooks, he had memorized details of the terrain and landmarks without

which he would have had scant hope of finding Osceola's village.

The water became shallower and shallower until it gave way to greedy mud that tried to hoard each footstep in a sucking grip. Turtles, snakes and alligators slithered out of the way. Some were large and might be dangerous, but Tom was glad to see them. Where there were no signs of these reptiles, one had to be wary of quicksand.

Stretches of saw grass looked inviting, but the grass was just a camouflage for treacheries. Tom shuddered at the prospect of having to camp overnight in such a place, but progress in darkness would be out of the question. Night and new perils were uncomfortably close at hand.

This intimate acquaintance with the Everglades told Tom Quest a lot of things. Now he could understand why a handful of Seminoles, who had fled into the cypress swamps in 1834, had been able to wage war with the United States for seven years. No wonder seven generals, some of them the best in the army, had found it impossible to dislodge the Indians. No wonder troops and even bloodhounds had been turned back. It was the swamp that had defeated them.

Hot tempers had prevailed during that war over a hundred years ago. There had been injustices on both

sides. The Seminoles had remained in possession of the inner reaches of the swampland, and descendants of the original Osceola and his followers had lived apart from civilization with hatred and distrust of white men bred into their very souls.

Tom thought of his father's hope that someday, when the swamps were drained, the Seminoles might be given legal rights to the land they had fought so long to hold, and an opportunity to live like human beings.

The sun was getting lower and Tom decided he might just as well let Captain Popple know that they would probably have to camp for the night and continue the search for the Indian village in the morning.

The tired old man was somewhat stunned by the announcement. "Y-you mean here in the Everglades?" he faltered.

"Yes."

"B-but those alligators, an' snakes—an' when it gits dark, there'll be panthers an' wildcats an'—"

He was interrupted by hoarse cries as a colony of egrets took to flight.

"Them lubbers!" he howled.

"They're just egrets. They won't hurt you."

"Might as well kill me as to scare the gizzard out o' me!"

"When we get a little farther north, I'm sure we'll find some dry ground and trees. If you're afraid, we can

spend the night in a tree, but I don't think there's anything to fear. Animals mind their own business."

"I wish I could feel the same."

The *squish* of their footsteps was accompanied by the chirp of crickets and a throaty chorus of bullfrogs. Occasional animal sounds could be heard as jungle beasts that moved by night woke up and stirred to look for breakfast.

Tom stopped beneath a willow.

"Now what?" demanded Captain Popple as Tom surveyed the branches overhead.

"I think," the boy replied, "this is as good a place as we'll find."

"T-to stay all night?"

"Yes."

"Y-you think they ain't no chance to reach that village?"

"According to the map and the instructions Dad gave me, we should be pretty close to it, but I don't want to travel after dark. And it gets dark mighty quick."

Captain Popple sighed. "Whatever you say, Tom. It's all right with me. But I wish—"

"I know," Tom replied, smiling. "You wish you'd eaten more at noon when you had the chance."

"Nope. That ain't what I was thinkin'. I was wishin' your friend Gulliver was with us. He'd be sort o' handy in case o'—o' trouble."

CHAPTER 21

The Double Cross

THE GUIDE named Timu knew his way through the swamp. He moved as smoothly as rippling water and with far less sound. Moreover, he traveled fast, and with the sure-footedness of a mountain goat. He had a manner of walking that left no footprints.

"Don't leave enough of a trail to trip an ant," Gulliver observed admiringly.

Timu knew just which of the knolls were safe and which were treacherous as he followed an invisible path across the palmetto land. He went ahead, Gulliver and Whiz Walton followed behind with Captain Laraby and Broderick side by side in the rear.

There were many wet spots, but Timu knew how to

avoid them. He stepped from one knoll to another, ducked beneath low branches, and avoided certain areas that looked quite all right to Gulliver.

From time to time, the sinking sun shone red through the trees, and Gulliver eyed it calculatingly. It was just slipping below the horizon when Timu turned and placed a warning hand on his mouth to indicate silence. He pushed on, toward a thicket, then stopped. "You go through," he said. "You find end of trail." He stepped back to make way for Gulliver.

The big man nodded silently, hitched his belt and parted the thicket. His eyes widened and Whiz, looking over his shoulder, gasped at what he saw.

Beyond the thicket there was a clearing of over a hundred yards, bounded on the far side by a stream of water.

To the left stood a pair of corrugated-iron sheds near which half a dozen men stood in a group.

To the right there was a smaller shack, made out of wood.

Straight ahead, on the narrow stream, lay the *Smack*-over X tied to a tree at the bow.

Nearest of all, less than twenty feet from Gulliver, was a two-foot cypress stump near which three men stood talking. One was short and stocky, another was about average in height but exceedingly thin. The third, a blond, was just as large as Gulliver, and it was he who spoke.

"I tell you," he said, "I've got everything covered! You needn't be afraid of pursuit by Broderick or anyone else. I've got Tom Quest aboard the boat! He's our hostage! We'll kill him if there's a move against us!"

"Did you hear that?" whispered Whiz Walton.

"Shut up! Lemme listen."

The lean man looked coldly at Kurt Dorgan. "The fact remains," he said, "you were given an assignment. You failed."

"Was it my fault that the incendiary boxes were slower than you figured?" argued Dorgan. "I did just as I was told. If the fires had broken out when they were supposed to, Laraby and Broderick would have gone down with the ship."

"Laraby and Broderick did not go down. They are alive, and they know too much for our security."

"But, Koerner," argued Dorgan, "they don't know where this hide-out is."

"Silence!" The thin-lipped command hissed like a whip. Koerner held up a clawlike hand. "You are not to argue with me. You have failed to carry out your mission."

Dorgan's face was flushed with anger. "What'd you expect me to do?"

"If you had remained on the *New Granada*, you would have been there to dispose of those who came aboard before they could effect a rescue."

"But I thought—"

"You thought!" sneered Koerner. "It is not for you to think. Gillig and I do the thinking. The rest of you do as we say!"

"If I'd waited until that tub was on fire," retorted Dorgan hotly, "I might have been seen making my getaway in the small boat!"

"Seen by whom?"

"The fire might've attracted a lot of ships in the vicinity."

"Excuses! I will have no excuses!"

The stocky man spoke for the first time. His voice was thicker and more guttural than Koerner's. "Koerner," he said, "perhaps we should not be too harsh with Dorgan. The cruiser he brought to us is good. We can use it to advantage."

"Be quiet, Otto. I will handle this."

"Gillig's right," interjected Dorgan. "That cruiser is seaworthy. We can load the platinum on her and clear out of here in a hurry."

"If you had not bungled, there would be no need for clearing out in a hurry."

"No one will move against us while we have Tom Quest as hostage."

"Why not?" snapped Koerner.

"We can send word that we'll kill Tom Quest if we're pressed."

"Fool! You think that will protect us?"

"Sure it will!"

Koerner struck with the speed of an asp. He brought his bony hand around in a slap on Dorgan's cheek. "You forget your place," he shrilled.

The big man rubbed his cheek silently.

"This won't get us anywhere." It was Gillig who spoke. "We'd better take advantage of the time we have to load the cruiser and get away from here. The sooner the better."

Gulliver and his companions had been taking in the conversation with bated breaths. Gulliver had been calculating the odds and the line of attack that would be most effective.

Broderick had paid no attention to the man at his side. Intent on the dialogue near the cypress stump, he hadn't felt the stealthy hand of Captain Laraby reach into the side pocket of his coat and remove his gun.

Jim Broderick had never wholly trusted Captain Laraby. Though there had been no reason to distrust him, the detective had maintained constant vigilance. He had been on guard during the run to Miami and at Hamilton Quest's house. He had remained in back of Laraby during the trip across the swamp. During the meal in Osceola's village and the hike from there to the edge of the outlaw hide-out, Laraby had been under constant watch.

But the finding of the camp, the presence of the cruiser, the buildings and the conversation between Dorgan and Koerner had driven all else from Jim Broderick's mind. And in that time, Laraby secured his gun.

"Get your hands up! All of you!"

Broderick turned quickly. Whiz Walton looked behind and said, "What the—" and Gulliver's hand dropped to his holster.

The gun in Laraby's hand cracked sharply. Gulliver jerked back his hand and looked at a streak of red from which blood began to well.

Yells and cries of alarm sounded from beyond the thicket. There were sounds of running feet and cracklings of broken brushwood as the gang came to investigate the shot.

Laraby stood back, covering Gulliver. "Try for that gun again," he snapped, "and I'll put a bullet through your head!" He moved the gun slightly, threatening both Whiz and Broderick.

"What is this?" cried Koerner, while Gillig overlapped the speech with guttural exclamations.

"It's Laraby!" cried Dorgan. "He's got the drop on the men I told you about!"

Half a dozen other men with guns broke through the underbrush and surrounded the captives.

"I brought them to you," exulted Laraby. "You can cut me in when you divide the loot!"

It all happened in a matter of seconds. When Gulliver found his voice, he let out a bellow of rage that brought responsive cries from a thousand frightened birds and small animals. It was an inarticulate bellow of raw fury accompanied by action.

Gulliver's fists swung on the end of mighty arms. The nearest man went down like a poleaxed ox. Another was fairly lifted off his feet by a blow that broke his jaw.

Then Dorgan brought the barrel of his gun down on the back of Gulliver's head. The big man's eyes became glazed. He looked confused and bewildered. Another blow, and his knees began to buckle. He went down beneath the weight of Dorgan on his shoulders.

Two men grabbed Whiz Walton before he could begin to fight, and two more covered Broderick with guns.

There was a slight sound in the dense jungle growth that surrounded the clearing. Laraby's gun blazed. Then there was silence except for the distant whisper of running footsteps.

"It's that Seminole guide," said the captain. "I s'pose he'll go back to Osceola for help."

Dorgan laughed. "Osceola and his bunch of swamp-root braves know enough to leave us strictly alone," he said. "They won't come near us!"

Koerner eyed Gulliver, who lay unconscious on the ground, then looked at Whiz and Broderick. His mouth

was set in a lipless line. He turned to Laraby, who beamed.

"Nice piece of work on my part, eh, Koerner?" he asked.

"How," demanded the thin man without emotion, "did they find the hide-out?"

"I'll tell you all about it."

Koerner nodded coldly. "You are right," he said. "You shall tell me all about it." To his men he said, "Tie them and bring them to my office."

CHAPTER 22

A Glow in the Dark

Tom Quest sat with his back against a cypress tree and fed wood to a small campfire. It was a blaze that could not be seen beyond a hundred yards. Beyond the reach of the firelight, there was a wall of darkness so dense it seemed to have a tangibility.

The night was alive with noises of the swampland creatures against a gentle undertone of sloshing water as those creatures moved.

The fire seemed to keep the oppressive darkness from pressing too close and it helped Tom stay awake. Those were the reasons for making it. It was wholly unnecessary for warmth or cooking.

Tom turned toward a thin snore. Captain Popple lay curled up with the life jacket for a pillow. In his sleep he looked smaller than ever, but even in repose there was a curious aggressiveness in his weather-beaten face. He had argued violently when Tom suggested that he try to sleep, and had agreed to a cat nap only after Tom had promised to waken him for a turn on guard.

Tom spread out the well-worn map in the firelight and studied the line of pencil dots that connected the present location to the beach. He was reasonably sure of the accuracy of those dots. Each one marked a landmark that he had memorized from his father's notebooks. A line connecting the dots would bear a very close resemblance to a similar line that was stamped in the boy's brain. There was a sharp turn to the east to skirt a quicksand area, another turn where firmer ground could be found by making a detour, and another turn, very close to the present site, to avoid a particularly hazardous pool of deep water. According to the map, Tom was within shouting distance of Osceola's village, but he had found no sign of human habitation.

Tom felt a slight misgiving. He didn't for an instant doubt the accuracy of his father's observations, but they had been made a long time ago. Over twenty years had passed since the exploration of that swamp. In twenty years, a lot might happen. The Indians might have moved away to an unknown location. They might have been wiped out by illness or by jungle life. Their village,

once deserted, could have been reclaimed by Nature, and grown full of tropical plant life that hid it from view. Perhaps, in the past hour of travel, Tom and Captain Popple had gone right past the place where Osceola once had lived.

He would renew the search for the village at daybreak, but what if he failed to find it? Should he continue without food until another night closed in, or should he backtrack while he had the strength to reach the coast?

If he spent the next day in the search, it would mean that everything was staked on finding Osceola. Failure would leave him and Captain Popple stranded, and too weakened by fatigue and hunger to get back to the ocean.

Tom asked himself what the situation would be if he started southward in the morning. Dorgan or other members of his gang might be watching all along the coast. If he escaped recapture, would there be a passing ship to take him to civilization?

His brain ached with unanswered questions. Worst of all he felt responsible for the life of Captain Popple. The old man slept like a baby with complete confidence in Tom as a protector.

The boy rose to his feet and stretched. A little walk, he thought, might shake off the creeping drowsiness. He walked around the fire, then began another lap in a

larger circle. The giant cypress came between him and the firelight, and in that moment he saw something that brought him to a standstill. He backed against the tree and peered into the darkness. Was weariness playing tricks with his eyes, or was that a faint glow?

He closed his eyes and counted sixty seconds, then opened them. The glow remained with trunks of trees outlined against it. The discovery drove away the last bit of drowsiness. That light would bear investigation.

Tom climbed the big tree, working his way upward through the branches as far as possible. He looked again in the direction of the glow and now he saw flames. A big fire burned brightly surprisingly near by.

Tom descended quickly, put his hand on Captain Popple's shoulder and said, "Wake up!"

The old man stirred with grunts and moans.

"Wake up," said Tom. "Captain Popple, how game are you?"

"What's that?" the other demanded, sitting up. "What did you say?" he asked digging his hands into his eyes to rub away the sleep.

"I've sighted a fire of some kind. It looks like a camp over in that direction." Tom pointed. "It might be Osceola's village."

"No foolin'?"

"If we take a couple of torches I think we can make it—unless you'd rather wait 'til morning."

"Not by a jugful!" The skipper leaped to his feet. "Git them torches goin' while I climb into my jacket!"

Breaking camp was no problem. There was nothing to pack. The fire would burn itself out with no danger of spreading, so Tom left it in case he had to beat a retreat.

He went ahead, carrying a bundle of burning faggots in one hand and a reserve supply in the other.

The ground remained quite firm and walking was easy. The underbrush thinned, and soon the community fire appeared. All doubts were quickly gone. The clearing and its ring of *chikees* were exactly as Hamilton Quest had described.

Tom called loudly, "Osceola!" and strode boldly into the clearing.

Osceola's paunched eyes sparkled with pleasure when Tom displayed his ring and identified himself as the son of Hamilton Quest. The chief shouted loudly, calling the villagers from their blankets and commanding them to waken and prepare a welcome.

Gulliver had been treated as a friend, but Tom was different. Tom was the son of the chief's blood brother —the son of a revered member of the tribe. New fires were built to illuminate the moss-draped amphitheater and the preparation of food got under way at once.

Tom found it not too difficult to converse with Osce-

ola. He knew some of the Indian words and used them in combination with gestures and the simplest English words.

He talked at length with Osceola and much to his surprise learned that Gulliver, and others whom he recognized from Osceola's description as Whiz Walton, Broderick and Captain Laraby, had been in the village earlier.

"Where go next?" asked Tom, leaving out pronouns and cropping verbs to the root so Osceola would not be confused.

"Go visit cy-prus stump," replied the chief. "Timu guide."

"The cy-press stump?" repeated Tom.

Osceola pointed to the picture Gulliver had scratched on the earth. "Mist' Gull-ver make," he said.

Tom recognized the drawing. "You know place?"

Osceola nodded. "Me know."

"Why Gulliver go there?"

"Him think you there."

"He was looking for me?"

The reply was a nod.

"Then he must have known that Dorgan captured me!"

Osceola did not comprehend. He shrugged his shoulders.

Captain Popple could stand no more. "Listen here,"

he piped, "lemme in on this. You mean to say your friends has gone to that cypress stump that Dorgan talked about?"

"I think so, Captain Popple."

"Swab my decks! Let's us go! I'm downright cravin' for the chance to deal with Dorgan an' git back my cruiser! Let's go quick as soon as we've had some vittles!"

Tom turned to Osceola. "Could we get to that place tonight?"

"No good. Too dark."

"How about morning?"

There was a nod.

"Good!"

"Morning bring sun. Sun bring light. Light come, you go cy-prus stump. Me show way."

With this Tom had to be content, and so did Captain Popple.

CHAPTER 23

Grim News

OSCEOLA had doubled up with others and placed his *chikee* at the disposal of Tom Quest and Captain Popple. They were just about to turn in when they heard a confusion of excited voices somewhere close at hand.

Captain Popple listened to the gabble and confusion outside the *chikee*. "What in tarnation—" he exclaimed. "What's goin' on out there? It sounds like mutiny or somethin'!"

"We'll soon find out." Tom leaned over the edge of the floor that was raised a couple of feet off the ground.

In front of the neighboring *chikee* Osceola and a number of other villagers surrounded a lithe, youthful-looking man whose skin gleamed like lacquered bronze

in the firelight. He was breathless as if he had been running hard and was apparently answering innumerable questions that came from every side.

He spoke in short, clipped phrases, accompanied by many gestures.

Tom pulled on his boots and joined the group. "What is it?" he asked Osceola. "Has anything gone wrong?" Then he remembered the chief's limitations and rephrased his question. "What wrong?"

Osceola pointed to the breathless man. "Timu," he said.

"Timu." The name struck a familiar note. Then Tom remembered. The guide . . .

Osceola said, "Come back fast. Plenty trouble."

"What kind of trouble? What happened?"

It took some time for Osceola to explain just what had happened, and even then there were great gaps in the story. It was, however, clear to Tom that Gulliver and the others had been captured by the men who lived at the cypress stump.

In the language of the Creeks, Osceola talked at length to Timu, then furnished Tom with further details.

"Mist' Gull-ver," he said, as he stood with his shoulders haunched and his arms slightly extended in imitation of Gulliver's apelike stance.

Then, stepping back, he pointed his finger at the place where, as Gulliver, he had been standing. He sounded the Creek equivalent of "*Bang.*"

Tom gasped. "You mean Gulliver's shot?"

Osceola resumed the position and manner of Gulliver and from that position dropped to the ground and lay still. He got to his feet, looked at Tom and said, "You savvy?"

"I—I'm afraid I do," the boy replied.

"He—he's tryin' to tell us Gulliver got shot. Ain't that it?"

"I'm afraid that's it, Captain Popple."

The old man sighed heavily. "Doggone it. Tom, I'm downright sorry. I—I'm likewise sorry fer the things I said about your friend. Now what're we goin' to do? Git guides to show us the way back to Miami—or what?"

Tom's face was far more sober than it had been at any time during his captivity on the *Smackover X*; more sober even than it had been earlier when he gazed into his small campfire as if to find there an answer to his many problems.

"I wonder," he said softly, "what happened to Whiz Walton, Jim Broderick and Captain Laraby?"

Popple shook his head slowly. "If they fell into the hands o' Dorgan's pals, I don't hold out much hope fer them."

Tom turned and walked to the *chikee*. He hoisted himself to the edge of the floor and sat with his feet dangling. He looked up when Osceola came to join him.

"Osceola, I want to talk to you."

"You talk, Mist' Tom. Me listen."

CHAPTER 24

The Stump's Secret

WHIZ WALTON opened his eyes. He had been sleeping while tied upright in a chair with his head bowed forward until chin touched chest. He looked up quickly—too quickly. Small bones creaked in the back of his neck. He groaned with pain. The reporter ached all over, but his jaw was particularly painful when he moved his mouth.

He was surprised to see daylight through the single window of a one-room shed. The place was meagerly furnished with a few kitchen chairs and a wooden table. Wooden cases of canned food were stacked to the ceiling on two walls.

Jim Broderick dozed, but Gulliver was wide awake and watching. "How yo' feelin', Whiz?"

"Terrible." He tried to move, but the roping had been done efficiently. His ankles had been tied to the legs of the chair, his torso to the bentwood back and his hands were tied together behind the back. Gulliver and Broderick were equally helpless.

"What—what happened?" asked Whiz thickly.

"There's been a-plenty shenanigans since yo' went to sleep. What's the last yo' remember?"

Whiz pondered for a moment. "Laraby turned on us, and there was a scrap. I guess I got knocked out."

"We all got some rough handlin'."

"I remember regaining consciousness, tied to this chair just like this. Those three men were here asking questions."

"That's right, Whiz. They hankered to find out how we located this place an' who else knowed about it."

"Laraby could tell as much as we could."

Gulliver nodded. "He likely did, but Koerner ain't a man to take nobody's word. He was likely tryin' to check on the truth o' what Laraby had told him."

Whiz said, "I remember Dorgan slugging me on the chin—"

"Yep. That's when yo' went to sleep."

"Do you mean to say I've been unconscious since then?"

"Yo' come conscious, Whiz. Then yo' went to sleep again."

The conversation wakened Broderick. He opened his eyes, looked around, moistened his lips and said, "Anything new?"

Gulliver shook his head.

"How are you, Whiz?" Broderick asked.

"Awful."

"I was just bringin' Whiz up to date on what went on last night," Gulliver said.

"What did?" demanded the newshound.

Gulliver grinned. "A-plenty!"

The reporter was angry. "With Tom Quest in the hands of these crooks, I don't see how you can sit there grinning!"

"Now, Whiz, calm down, an' lemme tell yo' what went on. Me an' Broderick watched the whole performance through that there window."

"Let's have it."

"After Koerner an' Gillig see'd they couldn't git nowheres with askin' us questions, they decided to go over yonder where the *Smackover X* is tied an' go to work on Tom. I'm a-tellin' yo', Whiz, when they started out, I felt downright beat.

"Then in ten—fifteen minutes, me an' Broderick heard a lot o' talkin' outside, an' it warn't no admiration talk. Them critters was actin' like teased snakes on a hot griddle! Koerner was layin' into Dorgan like a mule skinner an' Dorgan was yowlin' back as sore as a boil on

the end o' yo' nose!" Gulliver chuckled at the recollection.

"Go on! Go on!" demanded Whiz. "Tell me more about it!"

"It seems that somehow, between yesterday at noon an' last night, Tom an' Shorty Popple got away!"

"They did? Holy mackerel! How'd they do it?"

"Accordin' to what I heard they busted the glass in a clock an' used 'er to cut the ropes. They must've slipped over the rail an' got away without Dorgan seein' 'em."

"Leave it to Tom," the reporter said with admiration in his voice. "As long as he's safe, I don't mind so much."

"We don't know that Tom's safe," Gulliver said, "but wherever he's at, he's better off than he'd be here."

"Tell him the rest," interjected Broderick.

"The rest? What's the rest?"

"I'm a-tellin' yo', Whiz. Yo' never seen such goin's on! That place out there beyond the window was lighted up like day! They had the searchlight o' the cruiser turned on 'er, an' searchlights from them iron sheds at the other end o' the clearin'. Me an' Broderick hitched our chairs to the window so's we could watch."

"Watch what?"

"The critters loadin' up. They fetched all manner o' things from the sheds an' took 'em aboard the *Smack*-over X like they was gittin' set to clear out."

Broderick said, "We picked up a few snatches of talk. They knew that Hamilton Quest had provided us with maps and that he would unquestionably report Tom's abduction to the authorities. They're planning to pull out on the cruiser as soon as possible."

"I suppose," Whiz said, "Laraby stands ace high with the gang."

Broderick shook his head. "I don't know how Laraby stands, but Dorgan's in the doghouse."

"Have you any idea what they're going to do with us?"

Broderick nodded soberly. "They won't take us with them, and they certainly won't let us go. Draw your own conclusions."

"Curtains, eh?"

Broderick didn't bother to reply.

"I hope Tom gets back home all right," Whiz said. "I don't suppose," he continued, turning toward Gulliver, "there's any chance of getting loose?"

"I been workin' on these ropes for hours, but I can't git nowhere."

"Say, Gulliver, I forgot all about your hand! You were shot!"

Gulliver spat disgustedly. "That's nothin'."

"Nothing!"

"Aw-w, Laraby's bullet took a little hair off'n the back o' my hand, with maybe a little skin, but it warn't much more'n a scratch."

"It looked a lot worse."

"Whiz, just lemme have a chance to bunch my right hand into a fist an' aim 'er at Dorgan or Laraby an' I'll prove to yo' that my hand is in workin' order."

"Hey, look!" It was Broderick who spoke. "What are those crooks going to do now?"

Through the window the prisoners could see Koerner leading the way with half a dozen of the gang following. He halted at the cypress stump. Two of the men stepped forward, placed their hands on the side of the stump and pushed.

"It's moving!" exclaimed Whiz.

Gulliver's eyes went wide.

"Look at it!" the reporter went on. "They've shoved it to one side!"

What Whiz said was literally true. The stump was movable. It had no roots, but appeared to be fastened to a wooden platform camouflaged to resemble the ground. As the stump and the platform were shoved aside they revealed a shallow cavity or pit some six feet square. One of the men knelt at the edge of the shallow pit and began handing up wooden boxes about the size and shape of cigar boxes. They must have been heavy because it took two hands to lift them. Two boxes constituted a load as the men carried them aboard the cruiser. The men were working rapidly, almost feverishly, as they

trotted back and forth between the pit and the *Smack-over X*.

"That's it! That's the stolen platinum!" Broderick exclaimed.

"So that's the secret of the cypress stump!" Whiz said.

"That," replied Gulliver, "is what pore Musco tried to tell us in his dyin' message."

CHAPTER 25

In the Nick of Time

ALL THREE of the prisoners had hitched their chairs close to the window to watch the loading of the platinum.

Each of the men made several trips before the hoard had been moved from the cache. When the last boxes had been taken onto the *Smackover X*, the men who had carried them remained on board.

"Looks like the whole gang is on the ship," observed Broderick. "All but the ringleaders."

"That cruiser'll be downright tight-packed. I hope she heels over in the first blow," muttered Gulliver.

"If there's any danger of that," Whiz said, "Koerner'll

just drop a few of his men overboard. He's that kind."

"What're they talking about?" Broderick's query concerned a conversation going on near the cypress stump. Koerner, Gillig, Dorgan and the faithless Captain Laraby were in the group. Laraby was waving his arms excitedly.

"Looks like a row."

Suddenly, without apparent warning, Dorgan brought his fist up in a short jab to Laraby's chin. The captain went limp, but the blond giant caught him before he fell.

"Good work!" applauded Whiz. "I hope he smacks him again."

"Thunderation!" muttered Gulliver. "I wish I could o' been the one to nudge that chin."

"You think Dorgan didn't hit hard enough?"

"Aw-w, shucks, Laraby warn't even lifted off'n his feet."

Dorgan came into the shed carrying Laraby, and dumped him on an empty chair. Koerner and Gillig followed.

"Tie him," commanded Koerner coldly.

"No, no! You can't do this to me!" Laraby struggled frantically. "You can't leave me here to die! If I hadn't given you warning, you'd have all been caught! I helped you! I—"

Koerner silenced the man with a hard slap on the

face. "You," he snapped, "are no good. When it was to your advantage, you helped Broderick. You told him all you knew. Then, when you saw the chance to turn on him and get a share of our wealth, you did so. But I am not deceived. You would turn again if it were to your advantage. Disloyalty I have no time for. Tie him tight!"

The clipped command was to Dorgan who had already passed a length of rope around the struggling but helpless captain.

Laraby gave up the hopeless struggle and broke down, blubbering. "P-please do-don't k-kill me," he slobbered. "I—I don't want to die. I'll—I'll do anything you say—I—I won't ask for a share of the platinum. I—"

Slap!

Dorgan delivered it. "Now shut up!"

Laraby moaned incoherently while the blond-haired man completed the knots and turned to Koerner. "Now what?"

Koerner gestured toward the stacked-up boxes near the wall. "Those," he said, "we cannot carry with us. We cannot leave them behind. Use them. You will find that each case has a section of fuse as well as the explosive."

"Explosive!" gasped Whiz Walton.

"Did you not wonder why this shed was apart from the others?" queried the leader of the gang coldly. "This is our powder shed. Those cases were left over after we

had finished blasting our canal. We planned to use the stuff for—other work." There was a brief but significant pause before the last two words.

Dorgan had pulled one of the cases to the floor and removed the lid.

Whiz and the others watched in morbid fascination as the blond giant uncoiled a length of fuse and fitted one end to a percussion cap that came from a small box, also enclosed in the case.

"Use all the fuse," ordered Koerner. "We want ample time to get away."

Dorgan stretched the fuse out on the floor, and fumbled in his pocket for a match. Jim Broderick was tight-lipped and granite-faced. Gulliver eyed Dorgan with livid hatred stamped in every line of his rough features. Whiz shrugged his shoulders. "No one," he said, "can live forever." Laraby was slumped, head bowed, in the chair. The situation was too much for him. He had fainted.

Dorgan scratched the match on the seat of his trousers and lighted a cigarette before he applied the flame to the fuse.

"What riles me," mumbled Gulliver under his breath, "is that I can't even go down fightin'. Just sittin' here, waitin' for the end is more'n I can tolerate. If only I could git in one good whammin' whingding sockdolager of a blow I'd feel better!" The big man paused and in-

spiration lighted his face. "By thunderation!" he thought. "I can try!"

Dorgan was holding the match to the fuse but he didn't light it. Gulliver moved first. He moved so suddenly that everyone was caught off guard. He threw himself and the chair to which he was tied across the room. There was a crash as his great bulk smashed into Dorgan, spilling the big man to the floor.

Koerner shrilled in fury as he whipped out a gun. "I'll show you!" he cried.

Gulliver was still lashed to the chair which lay on its side. He was helpless in that position. He couldn't even regain his feet. Dorgan was about to rush him when Koerner cried, "Stand back. I'll fix him!"

The gun roared, flame lashed out, and a bullet chugged into the floor an inch from Gulliver's head.

Koerner didn't rush his second shot. He stood coolly, taking aim, and said, "You are fast, Mr. Gulliver. I wonder if you are fast enough to dodge a bullet. I shall place this squarely between your eyes. Perhaps you can see it coming . . . perhaps you can dodge. We shall soon know."

"Go on an' fire, yo' skinny buzzard!"

Koerner smiled coldly. "Your last words," he said.

Gillig cried out sharply as Koerner's finger tightened on the trigger. It was a shrill, nerve-shattering cry of

alarm and, coming from Gillig, it disconcerted Koerner's aim. The shot went wild.

"Look! Look!" cried Gillig, pointing to the open door.

Koerner turned as a dark-skinned body charged through the door, head lowered.

"Timu!" yelled Whiz Walton.

"Indians!" cried Broderick.

Behind Timu, Tom Quest and Osceola, followed by other Seminoles, poured into the room.

Koerner went to the floor before the fury of Timu's charge. He fired again, but the shot was buried in the ceiling.

Gillig was locked with Osceola, but Dorgan had backed into a corner and thus, protected on two sides, kept the Indians away with devastating blows.

The rest of the gang on board the *Smackover X* had seen the Indians and rushed to the aid of their leaders. They piled into the room and used their guns as clubs. At such close quarters a bullet was as likely to hit a friend as a foe.

The small room fairly bulged with the struggling mass of men. The air was filled with blows and grunts, with Indian whoops, and lurid oaths, shouts of pain and cries of warning. There were threats and curses and a steady scuffling of feet.

Two men fell against Laraby's chair and sent it spinning with its unconscious burden across the room.

Whiz and Broderick could only watch, and wait for someone to release them. Tom Quest had dropped beside Gulliver.

"If I can just get these knots untied," he said.

"My knife!" boomed Gulliver above the uproar. "Git my knife out o' my boot!" Tom found the blade and slashed through the ropes. In a moment Gulliver was free. "Now," he bellowed, "if I can just git my arms to workin'." He scrambled to his feet unsteadily and swung his arms to get the circulation going.

Tom leaped to free Whiz Walton and Jim Broderick. As the boy cut rope after rope, he heard Gulliver cry out.

"Yo', Dorgan! Yo're the man I want!"

Tom turned just in time to see someone about to bring down the barrel of a heavy pistol on the back of Gulliver's head. "Gulliver!" he cried. "Look out!"

But the warning came too late. The blow landed with a sickening thud.

Tom dived across the room, arms outstretched, and tackled the wielder of the pistol below the knees. But it was too late to help Gulliver. The big man's eyes looked dazed as he stumbled toward Dorgan.

"Yo'—yo'—Dorgan," he faltered.

Dorgan shot a blow to Gulliver's face, and then another. Whiz Walton tried to reach the side of his big

friend, but two men blocked his way. They closed in, and the reporter had all that he could handle.

Tom Quest rolled and thrashed on the floor with the man he had attacked. He clung desperately to the hand that held the pistol, trying to wrench it from a steellike grip.

Gulliver had thrown his arms around Dorgan and locked his hands behind the back, pinning his opponent's fists to his sides. His only hope lay in holding the clinch until the fog lifted from his brain.

Glass crashed as two men fell against the window. The table was demolished, and the chairs were smashed to pieces.

Tom's man was powerfully built. He jerked his gun hand free of the boy's grip and rolled quickly to one side. He was leaping to his feet, his gun ready for action, when Timu brought a chair leg to his head. He dropped the gun and slumped to the floor.

Dorgan couldn't wrench free from Gulliver's encircling arms. The two rocked back and forth. The building shook when they slammed against a wall. They fell through the door and hit the ground rolling.

Gulliver's head was clearer, and he felt strength surging through his arms. He saw the face of Dorgan no longer vague, but sharply defined and close to his own. This was the man who had locked Musco in the air lock; the calculating killer who had tried to murder Broderick

and Laraby; the fiend who had abducted Tom Quest in the hope of saving his own worthless life. Gulliver felt something like a red flame shooting through his brain. He released his grip and leaped to his feet, stepped back and hitched his belt. He spat on his hands and rubbed them together, and his face was livid with rage.

"Git up, yo' skulkin' coyote!" he roared. "Git up an' come a-smokin'! I'm ready for yo'!"

Dorgan leaped to his feet and charged. Gulliver shot a fist, but his blow landed on Dorgan's shoulder. Gulliver took a blow below the ear, shook it off and jabbed to the stomach. Dorgan lowered his guard. Gulliver's next blow came in high to Dorgan's cheek.

"I'm a-startin'!"

His huge fist hooked to Dorgan's chin and there was a *splat* as bone met bone. Dorgan, trying to take out some of the sting, ducked his head to the side, but a fist was there to meet it.

Gulliver crouched and sent a right, a left and then another right to Dorgan's stomach. Dorgan gave ground. Every one of those blows came like a sledge hammer. A big fist fairly sizzled to Dorgan's nose. There was a spurt of red, and Dorgan staggered back, but Gulliver kept boring in. He no longer tried to maintain any semblance of a guard. He threw fists wildly, raining blow after blow to every part of Dorgan's head and stomach in a deluge of unrelenting punishment.

"I been savin' one!" he bellowed, as he stepped back half a pace. "I been savin' a whingding sockdolager an' prayin' I'd git the chance to use it!" He leaped forward, shooting his fist to the point of Dorgan's chin with every ounce of his mighty strength backed by the impetus of his forward rush.

Dorgan raised one hand to ward off the blow, but nothing could stop it. It crashed through his guard and exploded like a meteor on his chin. Then Gulliver stood watching as Dorgan slumped to the ground.

"That's the ticket! That's the stuff!" shrilled a thin, high voice from the side of the clearing leading to Osceola's village.

Gulliver turned in that direction and saw Captain Popple break from the underbrush and run to meet him.

"I seen it! I seen it all!" the old man piped. "By gobs, you're the fightin'est man I ever seen! I hope you gave that big lubber one fer me!"

"Where in tarnation have yo' been?"

"Over there," the captain pointed. "Over there in the Indian village. Tom Quest an' me got there just before your guide came in."

"So that's how come Tom brought the Injuns."

"Tom told me to stay in the village, but I couldn't do it! I just couldn't, that's all. I tagged along after the others."

Suddenly it occurred to Gulliver that the fight hadn't ended with the downfall of big Dorgan. "Great day!" he boomed, "I got things to take care o'!" He swung toward the shed, then learned that he was mistaken. The fight was over.

His friends and the Seminoles were bringing the thieves in ropes from the shed. Broderick and Whiz Walton held guns and stood off to one side in a manner that discouraged insubordination.

Gulliver looked at Captain Popple. "I reckon," he said, "yo' boat is goin' to be downright crowded goin' back to Miami."

CHAPTER 26

Conclusion

HAMILTON QUEST sat on the veranda. The sun was low. Soon it would be gone, then darkness would come, and with it another night of sleepless worry. It was thirty-six hours since he had found Tom's empty bed. Thirty-six hours of torture such as Hamilton Quest had never known. It was worse, far worse than concern for his own life had been at any time in the Ecuadorian and Peruvian jungles.

He wondered if he should call the police again. He had called five times since morning. The last time there had been a trace of annoyance in the voice of the clerk who advised him that he would be notified when anything developed.

They had instituted a search. The entire police force had been ordered to watch for Kurt Dorgan.

"It would help, Mr. Quest, if you could give us a better description of Dorgan. . . ."

"I've told you all I can. . . ."

"We'll notify you when anything develops . . ."

What else could he do? Just sit here; wait; wonder; worry?

He saw a cruiser moving close to shore, coming from the south and pointing toward Miami. It was the *Smackover X*. Had it come just to torture him? To remind him that it was he, Hamilton Quest, who had arranged for Tom to go on that excursion?

The boat was turning in toward the private dock. Curious, he thought. I wonder why Captain Popple is coming to see me. There were several people on deck—one was waving wildly. Was that—could that be— Yes!

"It's Tom!" the man exclaimed, jumping to his feet. He hurried toward the dock.

It was an evening filled with talk. So many had so much to say, and Hamilton Quest wanted to hear every word. He sat next to the fireplace with Tom at his side. Gulliver, battered and bruised but happy beyond measure, sat on the opposite side of the room fondling his left fist affectionately.

Captain Popple sat cross-legged on the floor telling

about the way Gulliver had dealt with Kurt Dorgan.

"Yes, siree, he just lifted that jughead clear off'n the ground with that last wallerin' wallop! I come up on the run in case he needed help, but by sassafras, ole Gulliver didn't need no help. He handled Dorgan sufficient. Show Mr. Quest your fist, Gulliver."

Gulliver grinned and stuck it out for inspection. " 'Ole Sledge,' I call 'er," he said flatly.

Broderick came into the room accompanied by Whiz Walton. The detective had spent some time at the telephone. "Everything," he said, "is taken care of. The authorities will stop here and take custody of the platinum. They'll pick up a map and directions for reaching the hide-out, then go and pick up Koerner and Gillig and the rest of the gang."

"They," said Gulliver, "don't have to hurry none. Them Injuns will see that the coyotes are held 'til the law gits there.

"An' yo' better tell the lawmen to handle Dorgan careful. He hurts in plenty o' places, an' if they touch one o' them places, he yowls in a way that'd scare a sea lion."

"I think," began Hamilton Quest slowly, "that history has been made."

"How's that, Dad?" asked Tom.

"After all these years," his father said, "the Seminoles and the white men have fought on the same side. I hope

that this is the beginning of a real understanding."

"There's still one mystery we haven't solved," Tom said.

"What's that, son?"

"The fire in your study."

"Oh, that. That has been solved. You see, Whiz used a magnifying glass to study the chart. I asked him to put it on the window sill in the jar that holds my lead pencils. It happened to be in just the right position to concentrate the sun's rays on some paper in the wastebasket."

"And that's what started the fire?"

Hamilton Quest nodded. "I experimented and proved it to my satisfaction."

"Did you have another magnifying glass to use for your experiment?"

"I used a lens from the binoculars. That worked equally well," Quest said. He little suspected, at that moment, that this casual bit of information was to play an important part in Tom Quest's life. Destiny decreed that the boy would use that same binocular lens in one of the strangest places on the face of the earth. But that is another story.

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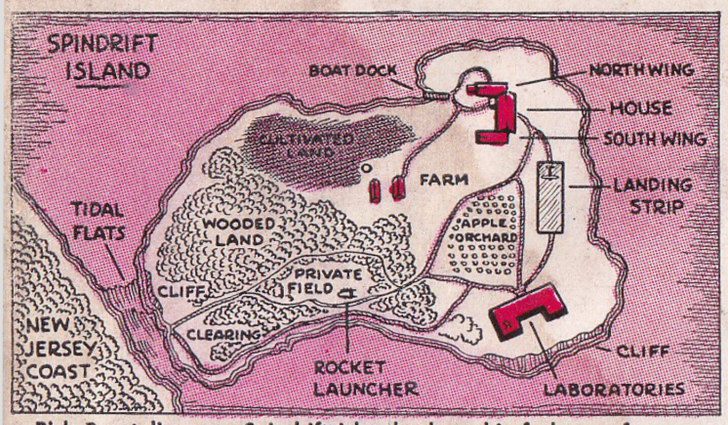
THE ADVENTURES OF RICK BRANT



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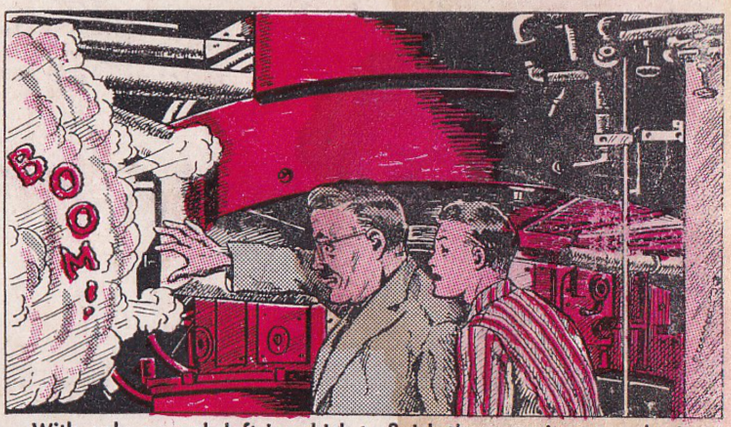
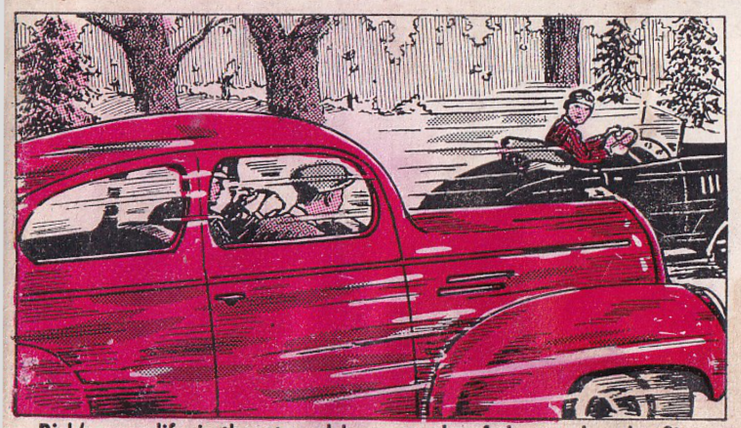
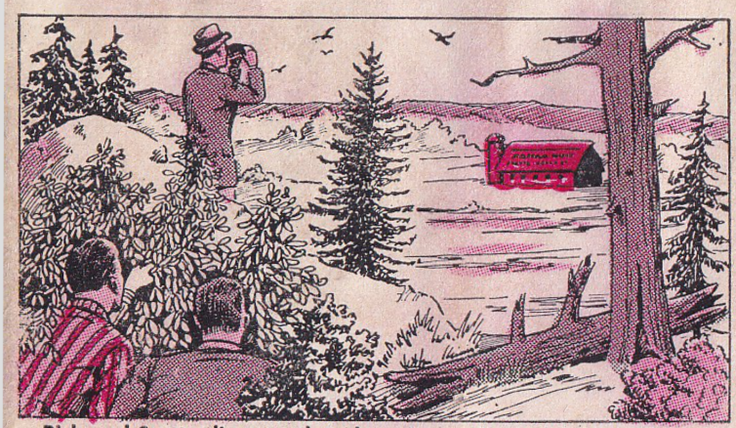


With only a week left in which to finish the experiment and win a $2,000,000 grant, the work is interrupted by strange accidents.

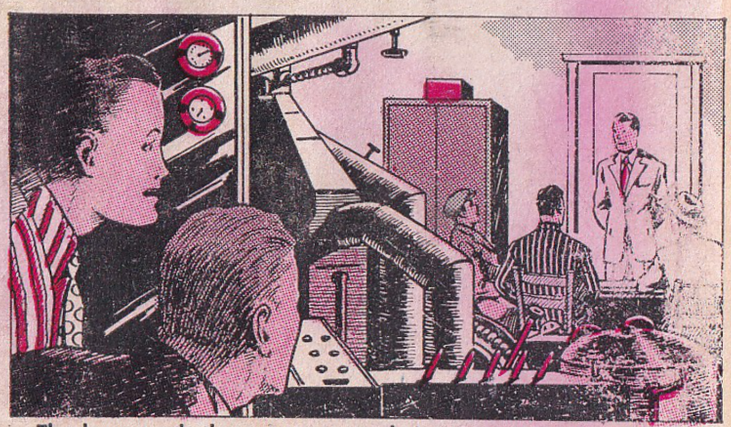


Rick's own life is threatened by a couple of thugs when he flies to the mainland to replace some vital equipment.

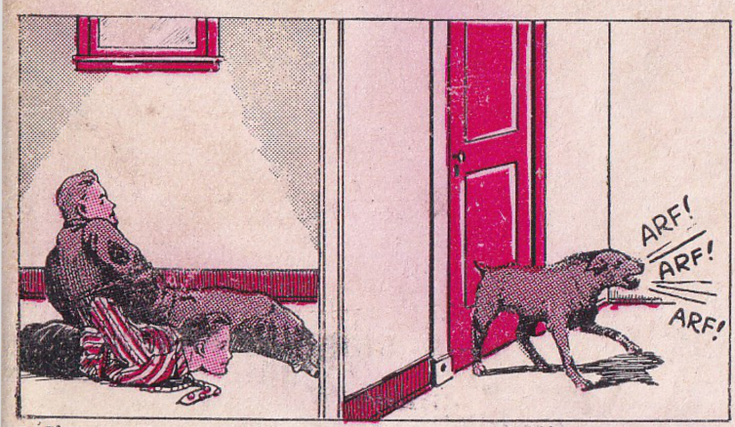
He is saved by Scotty, a courageous ex-Marine, who agrees to come to Spindrift Island and try to solve the mysterious accidents.



Rick and Scotty discover that there is a traitor on the island who receives instructions in code from a gang on the mainland.



The boys track the saboteurs to their secret laboratory. Before they can escape they are discovered by the gang.



They are imprisoned by the outlaw scientist who plans to hold them captive until he has ruined Rick's father's experiment.

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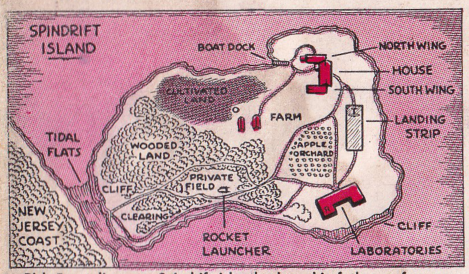

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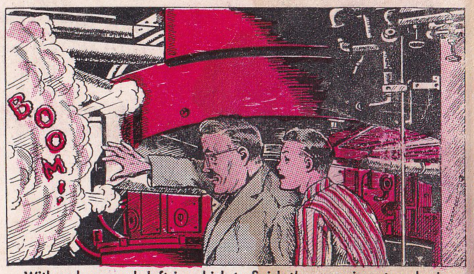

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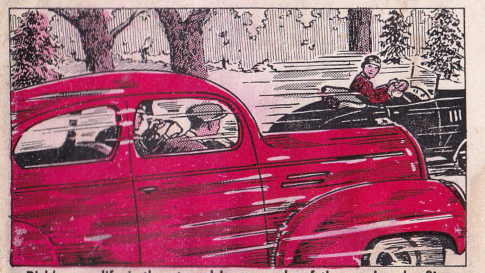

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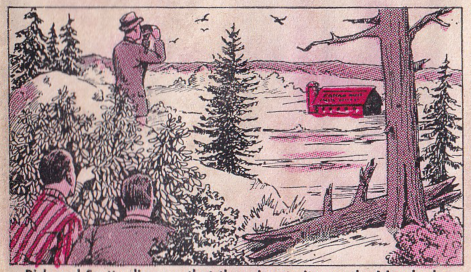

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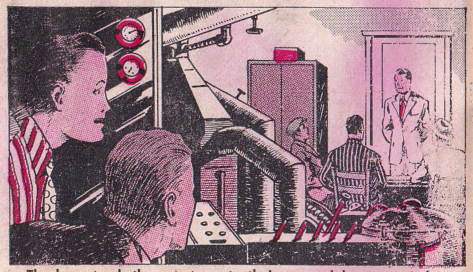

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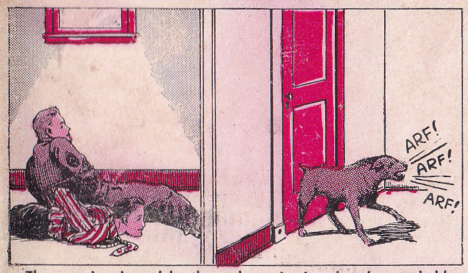

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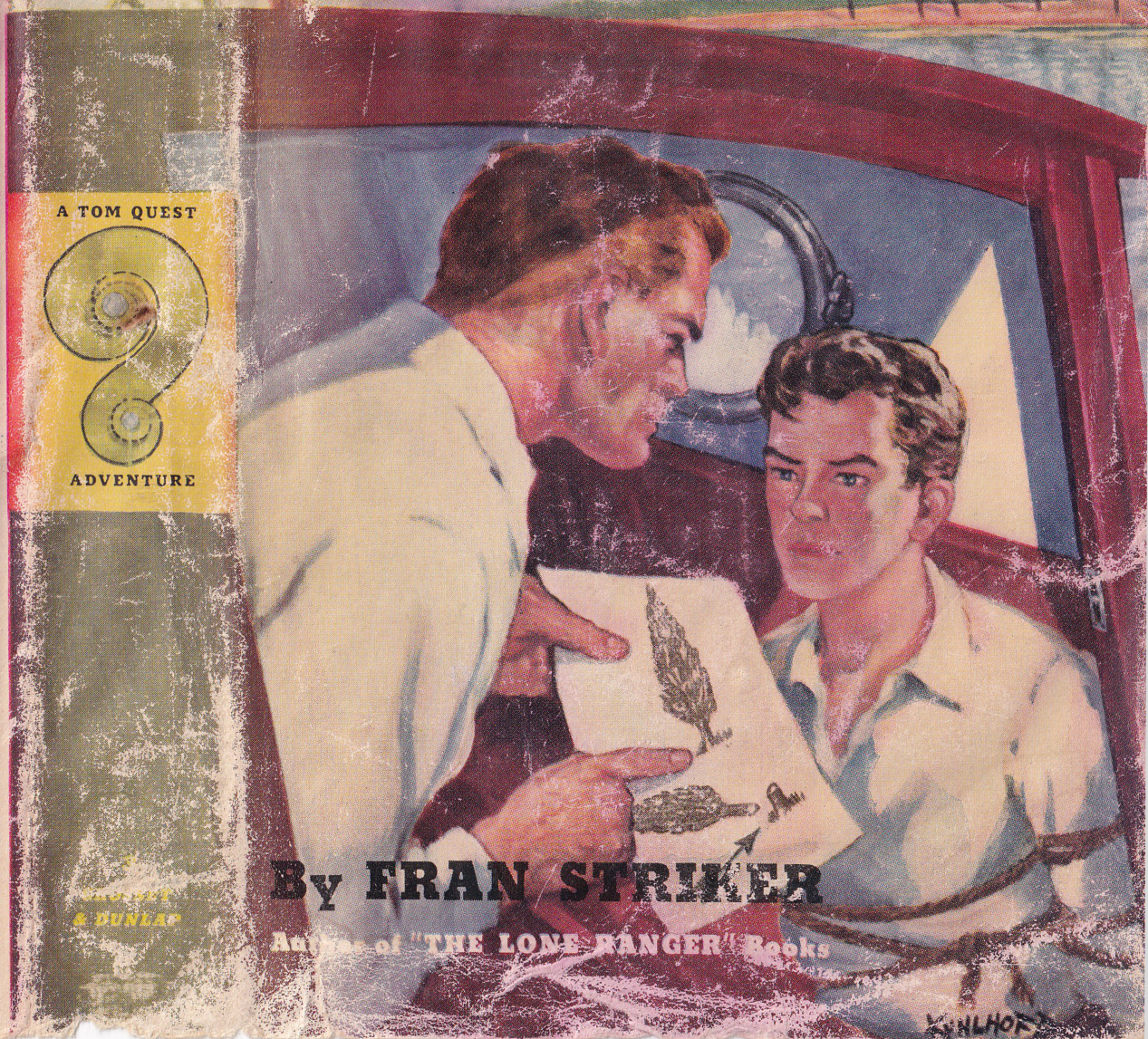

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